

Between modernity and tradition

The under-recognized legacy of Bulgarian women architects during the interwar period



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[in Bulgarian]

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o. Abstract

Bulgarian women were one of the first to pursue higher education of architecture in Europe when it became possible in the beginning of the 20th century, starting with Elena Markova (1894-1970) in Berlin, graduating in 1917. Women architects make a key contribution to Bulgarian modernism during the interwar period, while establishing partnerships not only with other male architects, but also with other women architects, yet their deeds are deeply overlooked. This is the case of Victoria Angelova-Vinarova and Mara Zaharieva, and their impressive Raduntsi Sanatorium, the largest sanatorium built in the Balkans at that time. Victoria Angelova-Vinarova graduated from Dresden. In 1926, at the age of twenty-five, she won a competition for the design of the new building for the Ministry of Public buildings, roads, and public works, marking her breakthrough in the industry. In 1939, together with Mara Zaharieva, they won a competition for the design of the colossal sanatorium in Raduntsi village. This architectural history thesis sheds light on the life and career of Bulgarian women architects in the interwar period, while focusing on the Raduntsi sanatorium case as an extremely singular architectural heritage that has not yet been protected. The aim of the research is to document the significance of women-led projects to break the historical depreciation of women's work in technology and engineering professions.

Keywords: Feminism, Women architects, Bulgaria, Modernism.

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1. Introduction

... architecture reinforces the prevailing political order by expressing its core values through means ranging from compositional principles to ornamental vocabulary - Antoine Picon, in "Architecture, Materiality, and Politics: Sensations, Symbols, Situations, and Decors."

Architecture is the very mirror of life. You only have to cast your eyes on buildings to feel the presence of the past, the spirit of a place; they are the reflection of society. - I.M. Pei

Architectural movements and socio-political developments often go hand in hand, especially in times of transition and instability. After a five-century-long Ottoman rule, ending in 1878 with the establishment of an autonomous nation-state, Bulgaria's socio-political condition was characterized by periods of fluctuation. By the end of the 19th century, the first wave of feminism started to gain momentum. Women regarded as stay-at-home spouses in the context of the traditional Bulgarian household suddenly became active revolutionaries in parallel with important historical events, showing the national awareness they possessed. Nevertheless, as professor of modern European cultural history at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" and pioneer in gender studies Krassimira Daskalova has identified in her chapter titled "Women's Suffrage in Bulgaria", progressive beliefs such as "ideas about freedom, progress and emancipation" were a subject of opposition with "self-appointed elites, monarchical arbitrariness, and populism". This political backwardness and fear of change following German-Austrian models slowed down the process of economic and cultural advancement, especially for the role of women in the public domain.¹ The transition towards modernization posed the so-called 'woman's question' and ascertained women as members of the social and political spheres. Nevertheless, Daskalova has also identified that women took a leap towards "prestigious, male-dominated professions and built careers" only after the turn of the 20th century.² Hence the defined time span as the scope of this research is during the interwar period (1919-1944), with contextual positioning starting from 1878.

For Bulgarian women architects, even though they had obtained the same education as their male colleagues, the reality was a life of marginalization and discreditation. Historiographical research in "Architecture in Bulgaria in the 20th century" by architect and valued history and theory researcher Lyoubinka Stoilova shows that modern, liberal thinking made its way into the country through (women and men) pioneers who had obtained their

¹ Krassimira Daskalova, "Women's Suffrage in Bulgaria", in *The Struggle for Female Suffrage in Europe: Voting to Become Citizens*, ed. Blanca Rodriguez Ruiz, (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2012a), 1. DOI: https://doi-org.tudelft.idm.oclc.org/10.1163/9789004229914_020

² ---, "Zheni, pol i modernizatsia v Bulgaria 1878-1944" [Women, gender, and modernization in Bulgaria, 1878–1944], (Sofia, Bulgaria: St. Kliment Ohridski, 2012b), 289.

diplomas in the West, especially Austro-Hungary and Germany.³ Even if present, women architects were overlooked by the public eye despite their contributions. The configuration of Fig. 1, with the university graduate and architect Elena Vakardjieva-Skordeva (1902-1978) standing in the corner, reveals that women are overlooked by the public eye as the weaker sex and less proficient in the sphere despite their contributions. The aim of this research thesis is to delve into the lack of recognition for women-led projects between the two world wars, and to put women-architects side by side with their male colleagues and make visible their equally important contributions. The intent of this analysis is not to suggest that there's a gendered segregation of specific architectural elements, but to argue that women are as important for building a new ideology in the architectural practice. Particularly, it focuses on the life and work of two pioneer women architects Victoria Angelova-Vinarova (1902-1947) and Mara Zaharieva (1898-ca.1960), who established a partnership to win the contest to build the largest sanatorium of the Balkans at that time: the Sanatorium in Raduntsi village, Bulgaria (1943-1955), as a case study. Angelova-Vinarova and Zaharieva are part of the first wave of female architects to receive higher education abroad, in Dresden (1925) and Munich (1922), respectively. Their contribution for the designs for public buildings across the country is highlighted by Stoilova in the chapter "Regional Reflections of the Modern Movement in Bulgaria Between the Two World Wars: Contribution of Women."⁴ Stoilova also mentioned in the chapter "Women in Bulgarian Architecture between the World Wars: Education and social status of the women pioneers" that it was not uncommon for young architects to participate in competitions during the interwar period, but the hospital project in Raduntsi is the only case in which two female architects collaborated and won, making this case study relevant to the gendered perspective of the research.⁵

³ Lyoubinka Stoilova, "Architecture in Bulgaria in the 20th century. Possible approach in research and historiographical description", in *Rethinking art histories in the twentieth century*, ed. Kler Levi, (Sofia: Institute of Art Studies, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, 2015), 147.

⁴ Lyoubinka Stoilova, "Regional Reflections of the Modern Movement in Bulgaria Between the Two World Wars: Contribution of Women", in *Problemi na Izkustvoto: Women Artists on the Balkans*, ed. Bisserka Penkova, (Sofia: Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, 2002), 30.

⁵ Lyoubinka Stoilova, "Women in Bulgarian Architecture between the World Wars: Education and social status of the women pioneers", in *Borders of the citizenship: European women between tradition and modernity*, ed. Krassimira Daskalova, (Sofia: Bulgarian group for history studies of women and gender, 2001), 291.

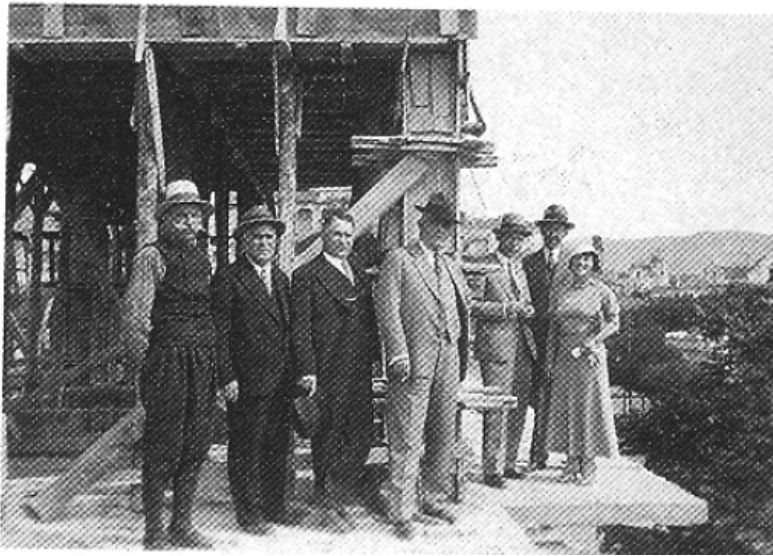


Figure 1 Architect Elena Vakardjieva with her husband arch. Gencho Skordev and colleagues on the construction site of a project in Stara Zagora, Bulgaria, 1929, personal archives of arch. Mihailina Skordeva (daughter), found in Stoilova, Lyoubinka. “Women in Bulgarian Architecture between the World Wars: Education and social status of the women pioneers”, in *Borders of the citizenship: European women between tradition and modernity*, edited by Daskalova, Krassimira et al., 280-301. Sofia: Bulgarian group for history studies of women and gender, 2001.

However, even though researchers have documented the works of women architects, there is an insufficiency in the analysis of specific qualities of their projects, further aiding the disparity of their contribution in the field. The need for further research into women-led architectural achievements stems from the literature gap described by Stoilova in analyzing the modernist qualities of their projects, especially emphasized in the chapter “Pioneer Women Architects in the Modern Architecture of Bulgaria”.^{6 7} For doing so, this research gathers primary and secondary sources of information. The primary sources include archival architectural documents of the Sanatorium from the Централен държавен архив [Tsentrallen durzhaven arhiv/Central state archives of Bulgaria] and a site visit in December 2022 to conduct fieldwork. The contrast between the original plans, sections, elevations and details, and the current situation explored during the visit is stark. Secondary sources of information provided background on the socio-political climate of the Bulgarian state in the defined period in relation to the development of ideological doctrines, Bulgarian architectural history, and the history of women’s movement in the country. The most influential authors are Stoilova and Daskalova, two forerunners in gender studies in Bulgaria, who provide a comprehensive multidisciplinary study of economy, politics, and socio-cultural aspects of women’s lives during the interwar period.

On this basis, the following chapters aim at situating the Bulgarian woman between the two world wars in a historical, political, and cultural context, while analyzing their work from an architectural and gender-based perspective. The first chapter describes the socio-political context in relation to women’s emancipation in public and private domains. The second

⁶ Stoilova, “Regional Reflections of the Modern Movement in Bulgaria Between the Two World Wars: Contribution of Women”, 29.

⁷ Lyoubinka Stoilova, “Pioneer Women Architects in the Modern Architecture of Bulgaria”, in *Presences/Absences: Women Artists and Architects in the Modern Art of Bulgaria*, ed. Irina Genova, (Sofia Art Gallery, November 2006), 16.

chapter focuses on the achievements and struggles within the narrative of chapter 1 of Victoria Angelova-Vinarova and Mara Zaharieva. The third chapter establishes an analysis of the Sanatorium in Raduntsi as a case study, to finally understand the relevant contributions of women architects during the interwar period. Lastly, the conclusions discuss the challenges to investigate women architect's life and work and the impact of their stories in the future of Bulgarian women in the architectural profession.

2. Context

Following the liberation from the Ottoman Empire in 1878, most of the post-liberated society was still bound by patriarchal traditions despite the national efforts towards neoliberalism. The new constitutional monarchy endured until 1947 with the establishment of the Communist regime. Yet, during those 70 years society was still mostly agrarian (75-80%). As for the urban part of society (20-25%), Bulgaria's engagement in multiple armed conflicts - the Serbo-Bulgarian War of 1885, two successive Balkan Wars in 1912 and 1913, leading up to the declaration of the Second World War in 1941 - destabilized the country and "exhausted the demographic and economic potential of the young nation". Daskalova described this phenomenon with a comprehensive context for Bulgaria's history in "Women's Suffrage in Bulgaria" from the book *The Struggle for Female Suffrage in Europe*.⁸ The post-Ottoman period exemplified a peculiar intersection of viewpoints because of multiple influences, with a general narrative of (Western-) Europeanization, which posed both as a threat for conventionalism and an opportunity for modernization. Women's studies researcher Tatyana Nestorova provided an outline of women's impact towards the modern Bulgarian state in her article "Between Tradition and Modernity: Bulgarian women during the development of modern statehood and society, 1878-1945". While there was a clear withdrawal from Ottoman conventions by adapting pan-European culture, the subconscious heritage of five hundred years of oppression has a lasting effect. Following Nestorova, gender segregation in the public sphere was further enforced by Islamic customs, where the moral virtues of a woman were consistent with her public image.⁹ Nevertheless, women proved to be catalysts of rejecting "Bulgarian peasant traditionalism" by getting educated, entering professional spheres previously reserved for men, and working towards equality.¹⁰ Despite the lasting influence of traditions and the destabilizing effects of various conflicts, Bulgarian women were able to make significant impact towards gender equality in the public and private spheres.

In relation to the political sphere, the rise of social demoralization, destabilization of the state, and segregation of minorities directly reflected on the progress of emancipating women between the two world wars. According to Daskalova, the political scene of the country was steadily "pluralistic" - exemplified by multiple political groups trying to dominate the interwar life. The main opposition of Socialists and the Agrarian political faction against the despotic and elitist monarchy on one hand, and Fascist nationalistic propaganda against liberal western-minded beliefs on the other brought forth social instability erupting in violent disputes, the pinnacle of which was the coup d'état on the 19th of May 1934.¹¹ The fact that there was not

⁸ Daskalova, "Women's Suffrage in Bulgaria", 2.

⁹ Tatyana Nestorova, "Between tradition and modernity: Bulgarian women during the development of modern statehood and society, 1878-1945", in *Women's History Review*, ed. June Purvis, (Columbus, USA: Ohio State University, 20 December 2006), 514-515.

¹⁰ Ibid, 517-518.

¹¹ Daskalova, "Women's Suffrage in Bulgaria", 2.

a single absolute system meant that women could freely associate with a political party. For instance, several parties openly supported their women's movements, such as the Democratic Party of Petko Karavelov, "the Socialist Party, the Agrarian People's Union, and the Radical-Democratic Party."¹² However, their participation in the political field was limited since:

The first Bulgarian constitution of 1879, in article 86 introduced electoral rights for 'all its citizens' above 21 years of age. [...] In the context of suffrage, however, the term 'citizen' was interpreted as referring only to males. [...] The term 'citizen' was thus ambiguous; its scope was not determined by the constitution itself but by tradition - that of a peasant patriarchal society without parliamentary experience.¹³

In that no-vote group were also criminals, "non-Christian gypsies" and "gypsies without permanent residence."¹⁴ The political turmoil during the interwar period had lasting impact on the progress of women's emancipation, with multiple parties advocating for women's rights but with limited participation. With that, the exclusionary nature towards minorities was slowly collapsing.

Bulgarian women's movements started to challenge cultural stereotypes and social ideals. Especially from the beginning of 1920s the patriarchal assimilation of the woman as a wife and a mother started to shift towards a modern public identity. Balcheva defined the revised mentality of the modern and emancipated women in a two-fold manner. Firstly, they gained a certain degree of autonomy from their husbands by achieving professional realization, which had not been possible beforehand. During the first world war, they enter male-dominated professional fields like architecture, engineering, and medicine for the first time.¹⁵ Secondly, the so-called "жени интелектуалки" (erudite women) were a small circle of revolutionary collaborators who were actively involved in women's schools, organizations, and philanthropic works.¹⁶ Nestorova mentions that the drastic rise of literacy levels among women during the interwar years - "from under 14% in 1900 to nearly 47% in 1926".¹⁷ Alongside individual fulfillment, women also formed national feminist organizations that, according to Daskalova, were the result of European influences. The most notorious example of such association is the Bulgarian Women's Union (BWU) founded in 1901, which amounted to more than 12,400 members by 1939.¹⁸ The BWU was formed as a counteraction of the restrictions imposed on

¹² Ibid, 2.

¹³ Daskalova, "Women's Suffrage in Bulgaria", 3.

¹⁴ Ibid, 3.

¹⁵ Balcheva, "The Issue of Women's Domain in Art in the Period between the Two World Wars", 10.

¹⁶ Ibid, 11.

¹⁷ Nestorova, "Between tradition and modernity", 517.

¹⁸ Daskalova, "Women's Suffrage in Bulgaria", 4.

women for entering polytechnical institutions after the 1890s for a “intellectual and spiritual uplifting”, as well as equality and voting rights.¹⁹ The transformation of the image of women in traditionalist culture was supported by these efforts during the interwar period, with recognition and visibility in fields that were previously unattainable through individual or communal determinations.

The struggles associated with political pluralism also influenced the architectural profession. The new generation of architects, who began their practice after 1920, tried to catch up with German modernism, in contrast to the older generation that further developed the pre-war styles such as Succession, Art Nouveau and Jugendstil in a mixture with old Bulgarian, Byzantine, and Arabesque influences. This debate for a new architecture was the focal point during the interwar period as indicated by Stoilova in the chapter “GENIUS LOCI - Search for National Identity in Sofia's Architecture Between the Two World Wars.” There was a search for a context-based national synthesis between modernist architectural practices and traditionally established ones. On one hand, architects were striving to achieve the feeling of nationalism lost after the wars, and on the other - to respond to new European architectural tendencies.²⁰ Modernist building language was most prevalent in Bulgaria in the beginning of the 20th century and included, as outlined by Stoilova, abstracticism, clean forms, dynamic views, rationalism, with inspirations from technology, machines, and nature:²¹

A relative stylistic consolidation of rational functional layouts and simple forms with predominating horizontal proportions outlined the specificity of early Modernism in Bulgarian architecture.²²

Late modernism exhibited a change in focus, from strictly modernist principles to a combination with vernacular elements. Starting from the 1930s, the most construction-intensive period took place, as architects, and especially women in state positions, through “new schools, hospitals, sanatoria and transport facilities” projects explored their personal tectonic expressions (Figures 2-9).²³ Following Stoilova, there are several typical elements of late modernism in Bulgaria, for instance the contrast between the stonework on the plinth of buildings and the smooth white plaster; pitched roofs; deep wooden eaves and wooden balcony railings; round columns between pairs or triads of arched windows.²⁴ On the interior, characteristic elements include: built-in furniture; wall niches and arches; fireplaces; wooden

¹⁹ Ibid, 4-5.

²⁰ Lyoubinka Stoilova, “GENIUS LOCI - Search for National Identity in Sofia's Architecture Between the Two World Wars”, in *София и нейните образи: Материали от международен симпозиум [Sofia and her figures: Proceedings of an international symposium]*, ed. Dobrina Zheleva-Martins, (Sofia: Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, 2004), 84-104.

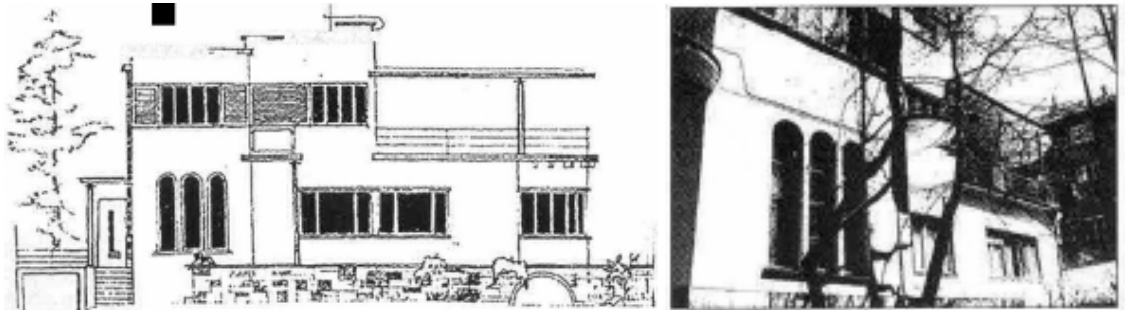
²¹ Stoilova, “Architecture in Bulgaria in the 20th century”, 150.

²² Stoilova, “Pioneer Women Architects in the Modern Architecture of Bulgaria”, 15.

²³ Ibid, 16.

²⁴ Stoilova, “GENIUS LOCI”, 85-89.

ceilings, doors and window frames; details from wrought iron that were functional yet aesthetically rustic.²⁵



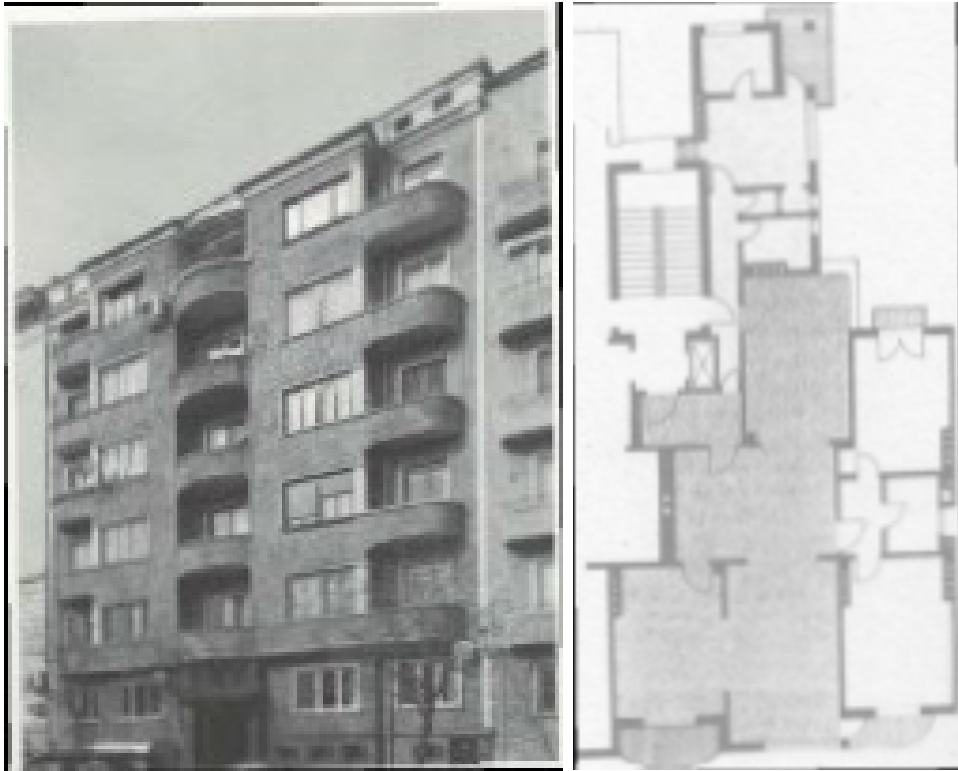
Figures 2&3 A drawing of the front façade (left) and a photograph of the same façade (right) of the private residence of Angel Kantardzhiev in Sofia, referred to as “The White Ship”, architects: Ivan Vasilov and Dimitur Tsolov, (1931-32). A mixture between modernist and traditional Bulgarian architecture can be observed. Printed in Stoilova, Lyoubinka. “Bulgaria”, in *The Modern Movement in Architecture*, edited by Dennis Sharp & Catherine Cooke, 57-64. Rotterdam: DOCOMOMO Registers, 2000. http://20c-arch-bg.blogspot.com/p/regionalismus-contra-moderne_28.html.

Private luxurious houses usually included the following characteristics:

- logical asymmetrical composition
- separation of functions through volumetry
- vividly contrasting bulks
- glazing and spaciousness
- variety of (expensive) materials on the interior and exterior
- horizontality, proportions, rhythm
- plasticity of exterior²⁶

²⁵ Ibid, 92.

²⁶ Stoilova, “Architecture between the two world wars”, 502.



Figures 4&5 A photo of the front façade (left) and a floor plan of a two-bedroom apartment (right) of the residential building block in Sofia, architect: Victoria Angelova-Vinarova, (early 1930s). A mixture between modernist and traditional Bulgarian architecture, with an economic interior composition, yet a with a neoclassical façade. Printed in Stoilova, Lyoubinka; Makarinov, Vasilev; Karakolev, Teodor; Vasileva, Aneta. "ГОСПОЖО АРХИТЕКТ," [MRS ARCHITECT,]. Sofia: Goethe-Institut Bulgaria and Foundation Bulgarian Architectural Modernism, 2023.



Figure 6 An aerial photo of the Bulgarian National Bank in Sofia, architects: I. Vasilyov and D. Tsolov, (1934-36). Printed in Stoilova, Lyoubinka. "Architecture in Bulgaria in the 20th century. Possible approach in research and historiographical description", in *Rethinking art histories in the twentieth century*, edited by Kler Levi et al., 143-157. Sofia: Institute of Art Studies, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, 2015.

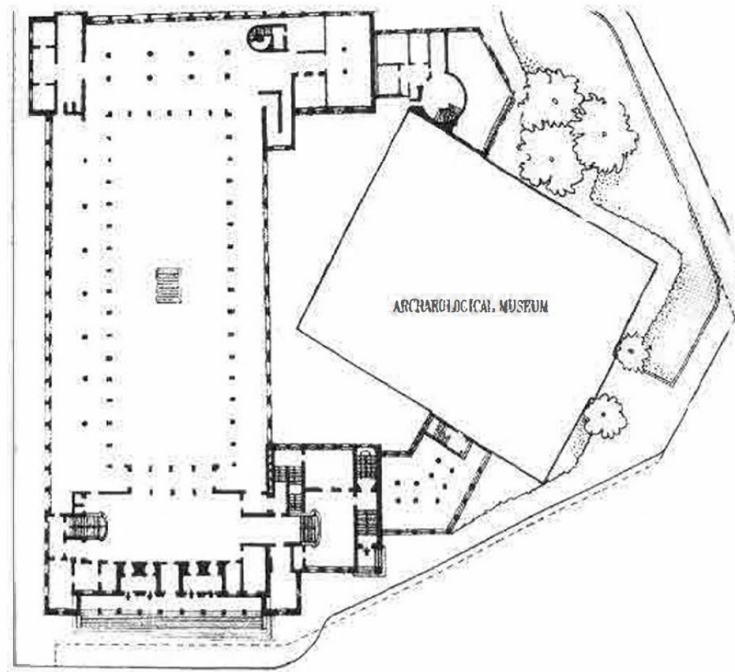
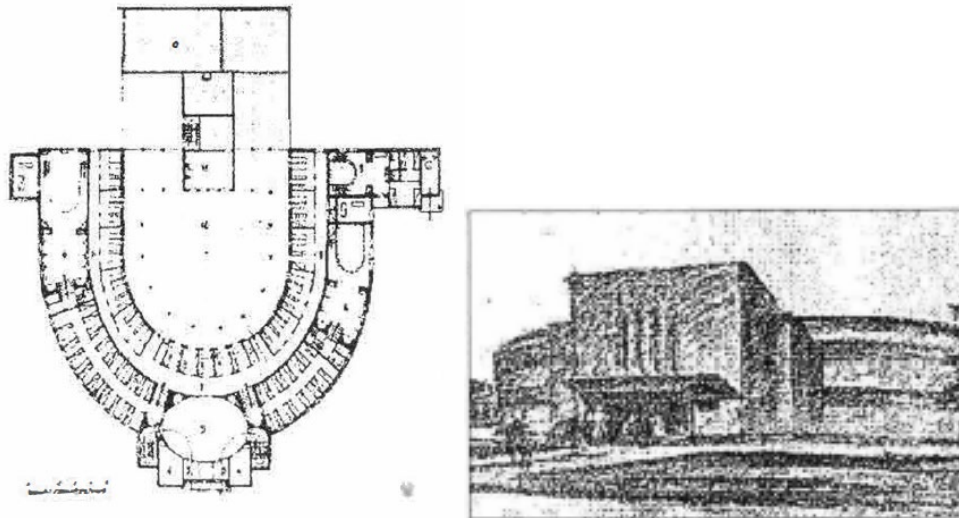


Figure 7 A floor plan of the ground floor of the Bulgarian National Bank in Sofia, architects: I. Vasilyov and D. Tsolov, (1934-36). Printed in Stoilova, Lyoubinka. "Bulgaria", in *The Modern Movement in Architecture*, edited by Dennis Sharp & Catherine Cooke, 57-64. Rotterdam: DOCOMOMO Registers, 2000. http://20c-arch-bg.blogspot.com/p/regionalismus-contra-moderne_28.html.

Due to the public character and state budget of residential complexes and other public buildings, there was a focus on already established building styles and methods, with certain modernist elements sneaking in:

- variations of classical order - Contemporary Classics
- solidity (power)
- eclectic ornamentation
- plans and interiors were modernist.²⁷

²⁷ Ibid, 506.



Figures 8&9 A floor plan (left) and photo of the main entrance (right) of the Mineral baths and Sanatorium in Bania village, Karlovo district, architects: Iordan Iordanov and Sava Ovcharov (1934-38). Printed in Stoilova, Lyoubinka. "Bulgaria", in *The Modern Movement in Architecture*, edited by Dennis Sharp & Catherine Cooke, 57-64. Rotterdam: DOCOMOMO Registers, 2000. http://20c-arch-bg.blogspot.com/p/regionalismus-contra-moderne_28.html.

Hospitals and Sanatoria exhibited a special sense of character and creativity from architects. Such projects were usually commissioned after a competition and would include such details:

- precise functional zoning
- band-like glazing (effect of curtain walls)
- horizontal articulation
- technical innovations (lifts, heating installations, flat roofs) ²⁸

The interwar period, marked by times of uncertainty and instability, significantly propelled the discussion about women's emancipation with the breakdown of traditionalist authoritarianism. Despite the challenges, women proved to be an undividable part of Bulgaria's process towards societal renewal which was taking place in every field, including architecture. Their efforts persisted at breaking exclusionary boundaries and traditionalist hardships through active participation in male-dominated fields.

²⁸ Ibid, 504.

3. First generation of Bulgarian women architects

The political instability provided women the opportunity to make their voices heard. Their struggles were closely related to the efforts towards modernization, according to Daskalova, yet it was not easy to join the breakthrough.²⁹ Until the opening of the first architecture faculty in the polytechnic university in Sofia in 1943, all students needed to study abroad. Stoilova discusses that access to education in technical universities and man-dominated professions was especially tough due to the tradition that polytechnical education is related to warfare engineers in the Ecole Polytechnique in Paris, established by Napoleon I.³⁰ The first Bulgarian woman to study abroad were Elena Markova (1894-1970) in Berlin, graduating in 1917. In the same year, Maria-Luisa Doseva (1844-1975) graduated in Darmstadt. Interestingly, Bulgarian women are one of the first to enter higher education institutes in Austria and Germany, including Victoria Angelova-Vinarova enrolling in Dresden in 1921.³¹ Just one year after its opening in 1943, the proportion of Bulgarian women-graduates of the polytechnic university in Sofia was significantly higher, almost 30%, in comparison to other universities in Europe.³² Some pioneering women architects, through a liberal background and an education abroad, became social activists who contributed to the Bulgarian women's movement. The first generation of Bulgarian women architects contributed to the transition from succession to modernism, getting educated in Germany (Table 1 and Figure 10)

Name	City	Graduation year
Elena Markova	Berlin	1917
Maria-Louisa Doseva-Georgieva	Darmstadt	1917
Maria Berova-Henning	Darmstadt	1923
Ginka Gineva-Petrusheva	Hanover	1920
Mara Uchkunova	Weimar (Bauhaus school)	1921
Maria Zakharieva	Munich	1922
Lyouba Toncheva-Vacheva	Munich	1922
Maria Variklechkova	Dresden	1922
Elena Varakadzieva	Dresden	1922
Victoria Angelova	Dresden	1924

Table 1 All first generation women architects, cities where they attended polytechnical universities, and their year of graduation. Source: Lyoubinka Stoilova, "Regional Reflections of the Modern Movement in Bulgaria Between the Two World Wars", 29.

²⁹ Daskalova, "Women's Suffrage in Bulgaria", 3.

³⁰ Stoilova, "Women in Bulgarian Architecture between the World Wars", 280.

³¹ Ibid, 284-5.

³² Ibid, 286.



Figure 10 Map of the cities and countries where women pioneers sought education in polytechnical universities. Source: Lyoubinka Stoilova, "Regional Reflections of the Modern Movement in Bulgaria Between the Two World Wars", 29.

Female pioneers were usually from big cities or grew up there, as the majority belonged to middle- and upper-class families.³³ Exceptional care for young ambitious girls ensued from an early age and their education in respected fields was promoted and, when financially possible, accompanied by a relative abroad.³⁴ Despite their pioneering work, Bulgarian women architects are often not recognized. After graduating, all future architects had to intern for one year at a regional or state administration.³⁵ Following that mandatory internship, most men established private firms, joined by their architect spouses, who usually remained in their

³³ Stoilova, "Women in Bulgarian Architecture between the World Wars", 286.

³⁴ Ibid, 287.

³⁵ Ibid, 288.

shadow, while unmarried women preferred the stability of municipal or ministerial positions. The second wave of women-graduates in Western Europe came back to Bulgaria in the late 20s-early 30s, and slowly toiled against the established patriarchal conservatism by working as freelancers, individually or with their husbands for professional stability and status or participating in competitions.

Until the Second World War, due to economic stability, unmarried female architects prefer the positions of state or municipal officials. Married ones develop a private practice alongside their house duties. More famous are those whose spouses are architects or engineers they work with, though they often remain in their shadow. Usually, their independent projects are for residential sites (family houses, villas, complexes, landscaping, and furniture design) and mass state or municipal social institutions (schools, hospitals, sanatoriums).³⁶

Between the two world wars, women-led projects amounted to more than two hundred built architectural projects.³⁷ Through their biographies, it becomes evident that women were active participants in the professional field of architecture, affirming their involvement in the resistance of the ingrained power structures in Bulgaria.

Victoria Angelova-Vinarova

Victoria Angelova-Vinarova (Fig. 11) was born in 1902 in Veliko Tarnovo, a big city - just like many other Bulgarian women architects belonging to the middle and high class.³⁸ After enrolling in Vienna in 1921, she changed to the polytechnical university in Dresden, where she graduated in 1924.³⁹ Just one year later, following the mandatory internship under architect Pencho Koychev (1876-1957) in the Ministry of Public Buildings, Roads and Public Works, she participates in a number of competitions and public projects.⁴⁰ She is regarded as the most popular modernist woman architect with an extensive contribution to projects such as public buildings, schools, museums, offices, hospitals, and sanatoria across the country, and was awarded the Order of Civil Merit.⁴¹

³⁶ Stoilova, "Architecture in Bulgaria in the 20th century", 154. Translated by the author.

³⁷ Lyoubinka Stoilova, "On the Contribution of Women to Architectural Profession", (Sofia: International Federation for Research in Women's History, 2017), 7.

³⁸ Ana Maria Fernandez Garcia, Catherina Franchini, Emilia Garda, and Helena Serazin, eds, *MoMoWo: 100 Works in 100 Years: European Women in Architecture and Design: 1918-2018*, (Ljubljana: France Stele Institute of Art History, 2016), 63.

³⁹ Stoilova, "Women in Bulgarian Architecture between the World Wars", 284.

⁴⁰ Stoilova, Lyoubinka; Makarinov, Vasilev; Karakolev, Teodor; Vasileva, Aneta. "ГОСПОЖО АРХИТЕКТ," [MRS ARCHITECT,]. (Sofia: Goethe-Institut Bulgaria and Foundation Bulgarian Architectural Modernism, 2023), 28.

⁴¹ Fernandez Garcia, *MoMoWo*, 63.



Figure 11 Victoria Angelova-Vinarova over a drawing table and her signature, 1926. Printed in Stoilova, Lyoubinka. "Pioneer Women Architects in the Modern Architecture of Bulgaria", in *Presences/Absences: Women Artists and Architects in the Modern Art of Bulgaria*, edited by Genova, Irina, 14-31. Sofia Art Gallery, November 2006.

Bulgarian graduates abroad tended to represent stylistic approaches based on their specific schools and professors. For example, Victoria Angelova-Vinarova acquired modernist expressive language from her German professor in Dresden Martin Dulfer, who later in his career worked on *Dans Neue Baunen* (The New Objectivity/ The New Building). Her inspirations include the massive silhouetting of geometric volumes and sculpturally yet simplicity.⁴² Notable works of Angelova include her first competition, the new building of the Ministry of Public Buildings, Roads, and Public Works, which has been repurposed into the National Library

⁴² Stoilova, "Regional Reflections of the Modern Movement in Bulgaria Between the Two World Wars: Contribution of Women", 30.

in Sofia (Fig. 12).⁴³ A year later, in 1926, she won another competition for the design of the Home of the Holidays in Sofia (Дом на Празниците), but the investor decided not to trust such a young and unexperienced (woman) architect.⁴⁴ Together with her future husband Boris Vinarov, whom she married in 1933, and a colleague Chavdar Mutafov, they participated in a competition for the new main directory of railways and ports in 1930.⁴⁵ The Burgas Casino (1936-38) is another competition project that stands out with its clear rational horizontality, machine-like exterior qualities, use of window bands and balustrades, typical for the International Style (Fig. 13).⁴⁶



Figure 12 a photo of the entrance façade of the Ministry of Public Buildings, Roads and Public Works, architect: Victoria Angelova-Vinarova (1926-30), Printed in Stoilova, Lyoubinka. "Architecture between the two world wars", in *Sofia, 120 years as a capital of Bulgaria*, edited by Marin Drinov, 498-507. Sofia: Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, 2001.



Figure 13 A photo of the entrance façade of the Burgas Casino, architect: Victoria Angelova-Vinarova (1936-38), Printed in Garcia, F., Ana Maria, Catherina Franchini, Emilia Garda, and Helena Serazin, eds. *MoMoWo: 100 Works in 100 Years: European Women in Architecture and Design: 1918-2018*. Ljubljana: France Stele Institute of Art History, 2016.

As time progressed, the architectural experience of Angelova illustrated a clear progression towards the spirit of the Modernist movement. This phenomenon is especially evident in her

⁴³ Ibid, 29.

⁴⁴ Stoilova, "ГОСПОЖО АРХИТЕКТ," [MRS ARCHITECT,]. (Sofia: Goethe-Institut Bulgaria and Foundation Bulgarian Architectural Modernism, 2023), 28.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 28.

⁴⁶ Fernandez Garcia, *MoMoWo*, (Ljubljana: France Stele Institute of Art History, 2016), 62.

later hospital and sanatoria works. ⁴⁷ The Alexandrovska Hospital in Sofia (1935-36) (Fig. 14-15) is a prime example of optimized interior zoning situated within rational volumes. In her mature professional years, her projects become more proportional and coherent, for instance the remarkable Raduntsi Sanatorium for pulmonary diseases (1943-55), a competition entry in collaboration with Mara Zaharieva awarded first place - a big achievement celebrated by her family (Fig. 16-19). ⁴⁸

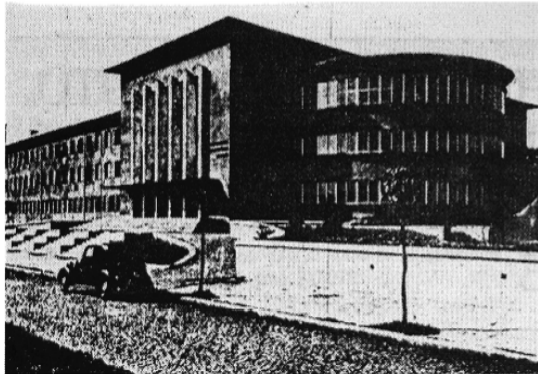


Figure 14 A photo of the entrance façade of the Alexandrovska Hospital, architect: Victoria Angelova-Vinarova (1935-36). Printed in Stoilova, Lyoubinka. “Regional Reflections of the Modern Movement in Bulgaria Between the Two World Wars: Contribution of Women”, in *Problemi na Izkustvoto: Women Artists on the Balkans*, edited by Bissierka Penkova, 29-64. Sofia: Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, 2002.

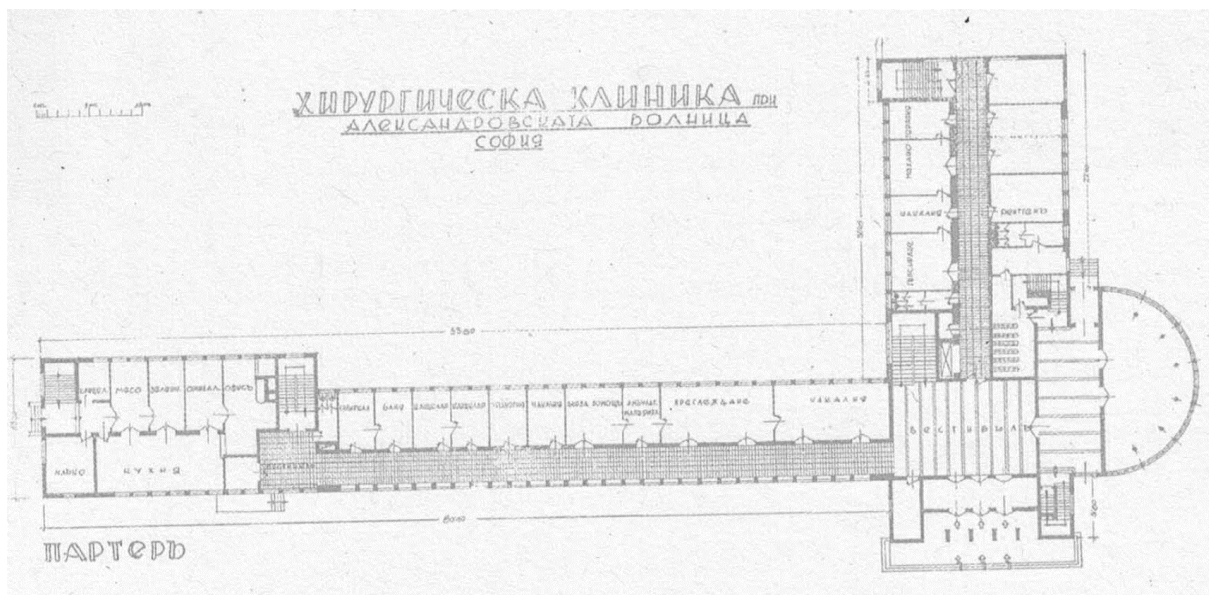
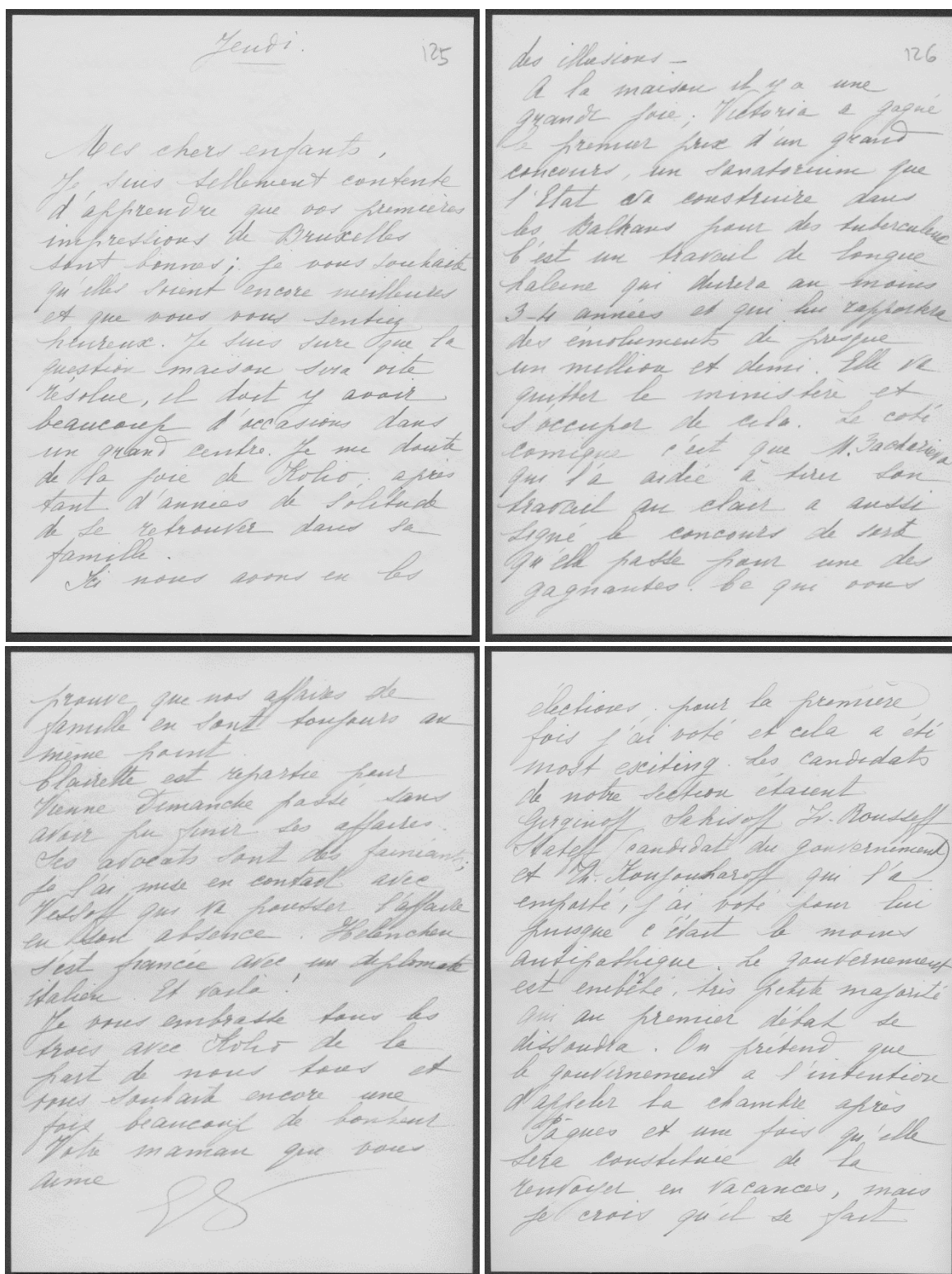


Figure 15 A floor plan of the ground floor of the Alexandrovska Hospital, architect: Victoria Angelova-Vinarova. Printed in Stoilova, Lyoubinka; Makarinov, Vasilev; Karakolev, Teodor; Vasileva, Aneta. "ГОСПОЖО АРХИТЕКТ," [MRS ARCHITECT,]. Sofia: Goethe-Institut Bulgaria and Foundation Bulgarian Architectural Modernism, 2023.

⁴⁷ Stoilova, "ГОСПОЖО АРХИТЕКТ," [MRS ARCHITECT,], 28.

⁴⁸ Stoilova, "Pioneer Women Architects in the Modern Architecture of Bulgaria", 15.



Figures 16-19 Pages 1 (top left), 2 (top right), 3 (bottom left) and 4 (bottom right) of a letter from Elza Vinarova (mother) to Bistra Vinarova describing her impressions from Brussels and the first place in a competition awarded to Victoria Vinarova for the Sanatorium in Raduntsi, 1939, personal family archives of Simeon and Bistra Radevi (1879-2010) [Семейен фонд Радеви, Симеон и Бистра], found in Central State Archives of Bulgaria, Sofia, Bulgaria.

Angelova burned out during the construction of the sanatorium,⁴⁹ and shortly after the World War II bombings of Sofia in 1944 that destroyed the home of Angelova and her husband, she passed away from tuberculosis.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, her contribution to the establishment of the Modernist architecture as a leading force and her support to women's movement by entering and prospering in a male-dominated field is significant.

Mara Zaharieva

Mara Zaharieva (1898–1960s) worked and lived in Sofia after graduating from the polytechnical university in Munich in 1922 (Fig. 20).⁵¹ Less is known about her life, and the only image of her is a painting. She participated in competitions with Angelova several times, the most notable of which are the Sanatorium in Iskrets village in Western Bulgaria (1937-38) and the Sanatorium in Raduntsi, Southern Bulgaria (1939-42, completed in 1955).⁵² Zaharieva stays at her state position in Sofia Municipality, where she works on a variety of public buildings, schools, and hospitals (Fig. 21).⁵³



Figure 20 Mara Zaharieva during her internship in Kyoustendil. Portait made by Moris Bentsionow, inventory number 363, Kyoustendil Art Gallery archives, Kyoustendil, n.d. Printed in Stoilova, Lyoubinka. 'Women in Bulgarian Architecture between the World Wars: Education and social status of the women pioneers', in *Borders of the citizenship: European women between tradition and modernity*, edited by Daskalova, Krasimira et al., 280-301. Sofia: Bulgarian group for history studies of women and gender, 2001.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 16.

⁵⁰ Stoilova, "ГОСПОЖО АРХИТЕКТ," [MRS ARCHITECT,], 28.

⁵¹ Stoilova, "Regional Reflections of the Modern Movement in Bulgaria Between the Two World Wars: Contribution of Women", 30.

⁵² Ibid, 32.

⁵³ Stoilova, "ГОСПОЖО АРХИТЕКТ," [MRS ARCHITECT,], 5.



Figure 21 A photo of the Вехтошарски пазар [Vechtoshtarski market/Ragman market] in Sofia, architect: Mara Zaharieva (1933-34). Photograph by Foundation Bulgarian Architectural Modernism, *Вехтошарски пазар – София*, 2022, Foundation Bulgarian Architectural Modernism, <https://foundationbma.org/вехтошарски-пазар-София-1-190>.

Limited access to education and discrimination hindered the professional development of women. The financial capability of their families definitely promoted their advancement in the public field, but what helped them establish themselves was perseverance and hard work. Despite all limitations, women architects managed to produce fascinating projects, mainly public buildings, that would cultivate the Modernist architectural movement in Bulgaria. Victoria Angelova-Vinarova and Mara Zaharieva are symbols of women's activism in male-dominated fields by fighting to solidify their careers. Today looking back, their work is admirable and influential of the development of an local architectural language. Through their involvement in architecture, these women confronted patriarchal societal conventions and laid the foundations for future generations of Bulgarian women architects.

4. Case study - Sanatorium, Raduntsi village



Figure 22 Aerial photograph of the South façade of the Sanatorium, 1954, album 17-III-1, Sanatoriums, Държавно Предприятие "Българска фотография", Държавен Фотоархив (State Enterprise "Bulgarian Photography"), Archives state agency, Raduntsi, Bulgaria

The 140-meter-long South façade ranked the Sanatorium of Raduntsi as the biggest tuberculosis hospital in the Balkans during its time (Fig. 22).⁵⁴ The masterplan includes establishments for both patients (of which men, women and children) and employees (who were housed in 7 building blocks built at a later stage), visible in the masterplan in Figure 23. In total, there were four hundred and sixty beds in the peak of its usage - two hundred for men, one hundred and sixty for women and one hundred for children. Men's and women's sections occupied the wings on either side of the central core with a separate wing for children.⁵⁵ The complex offers not only health services, but also an indoor and an outdoor cinema, education facilities, sport center and many others.⁵⁶ The grouping and sequence of functions stem from a rational approach. Prioritizing functionality and efficiency, the volumetry is simplified and clustered. There is a complete utilitarian dismissal of ornamentation.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Stoilova, "Pioneer Women Architects in the Modern Architecture of Bulgaria", 16.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 61.

⁵⁶ Stoilova, "Bulgaria", 60.

⁵⁷ Stoilova, "Pioneer Women Architects in the Modern Architecture of Bulgaria", 15.



Figure 23 Terrain map of the Sanatorium. part of the final drawings of the project, 1941, found in Central State Archives of Bulgaria, Sofia, Bulgaria.

The strong exterior horizontal articulation is typical for modernist expressions. The central entrance core playfully fragments rhythm of the elongated rectangular cuboids. On the rear side, five volumes are sticking out that contain vertical circulation spaces, creating a repetitive volumetry. The horizontal window bands at the wall corners in the circulation volumes express a feeling of lightness by imitating curtain walls, offering a view through the entire span of the main building (Fig. 24&25).⁵⁸ The clear modernist gestures - the rational positioning of simple yet powerful volumes - are further enhanced with vernacular building elements. For example,

⁵⁸ Ibid, 62.



the exterior façade is clad with limestone derived from the region, however, the plinth band utilizes a different type of stone, typical for Bulgarian vernacular residential architecture (Fig. 27). The building exhibits a clear modernist language (the submarine-like oval windows (Fig. 26), metal balustrades, strong emphasis on horizontality, clear volumetry) with an indication of national influence (the heavy plinth, neo-classical grand entrance and stairs, sloped roof). In a time of uncertainty during the interwar period, there was a search for a national, context-based style of architecture. Angelova and Zaharieva's building stated a clear position on this debate - Bulgarian modernism must include elements of old and new.

The distribution and sequence of spaces is quite rational: the central part includes common facilities such as dining room, kitchen, administration, as well as medical services on the top floors.



Figure 24 Horizontal window bands in the corners of the circulation volumes, 2022. Photo by author.



Figure 26 Oval windows at main entrance, 2022. Photo by author.



Figure 25 View from the horizontal window bands across the building towards the following circulation core, 2022. Photo by the author.



Figure 27 Main entrance with two types of stones in the plinth and the rest of the south façade, 2022. Photo by the author.

The interiors display qualities of technical advancements for that time. Heating installations and lifts were present (Fig. 28).⁵⁹ From the decaying state of the sanatorium, the exterior walls were torn up from the inside, revealing an integrated heater-based system running along the entire perimeter of the building. Separate patient rooms also included at least one heater, based on the size of the room and the amount of people it could accommodate.



Figure 28 Old elevator seen on the ground floor, designated for the staff only, 2022. Photo by the author.

⁵⁹ Stoilova, "Architecture in Bulgaria in the 20th century", 504.

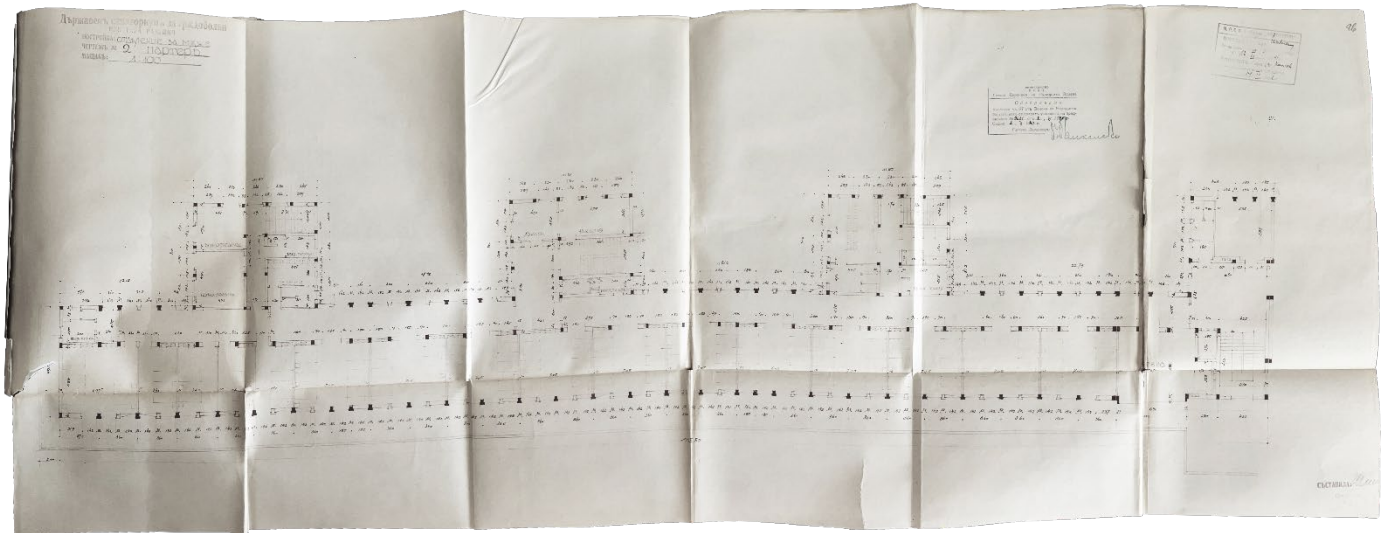


Figure 29 Ground floor plan, 1941. found in Central State Archives of Bulgaria, Sofia, Bulgaria.

The structural grid shown in Figure 29 offered the possibility of an open-plan communal rooms, like the cafeteria, theater, cinema, and so forth. The grid allowed the placement of many windows, providing an abundance of daylight into the main corridors and patient rooms (Fig. 30&31).



Figure 30 Patient room bathed in sunlight, 2022. Photo by author.



Figure 31 Main corridor with windows to the right and patient rooms to the left, 2022. Photo by author.

It is questionable whether the original interiors were present during the site visit, or the building had been renovated some time before it closed down in 2015. Still, the interiors featured both modernist and traditionalist Bulgarian character. The full-height wood cladding on the walls gently integrated furniture like shelves and seating (Fig. 32&33). Particular attention had been paid to the main office of the director, where all walls are clad, the door is sound-proofed with a similar color leather (Fig. 34). The heating installations are carefully concealed with the same material cladding to give an atmosphere of coherence. The furniture is massive and heavy and gives a feeling of authority.



Figure 32 Doctor's room A, 2022. Photo by author.



Figure 33 Doctor's room B, 2022. Photo by author.



Figure 34 Director's office, 2022. Photo by the author.

The thought behind every element in the detailing of the building can be seen in the visible structure elements clad in wood or painted with the same color of the walls (Fig. 35&36). The attention to detail and a clear concept is evident on every scale of the hospital. In the children's wing, kid-sized furniture and installations are incorporated to fit in with the interiors of the hallway in harmony. Through the use of natural materials, together with the attentive dimensioning to fit the purpose, the building speaks of considerate design (Fig. 37).



Figure 35 Director's office with abundance of materiality, 2022. Photo by the author.



Figure 36 Corridor next to the director's office, 2022. Photo by author.



Figure 37 Sinks integrated into the wall in the children's wing, 2022. Photo by the author.

The design of the Sanatorium in Raduntsi village by Victoria Angelova-Vinarova and Mara Zaharieva showcased an embodiment of Modernist architectonic expressions, while honoring traditional Bulgarian elements. This synthesized elucidation of Western and local architectural language strengthens the design and creates a powerful and coherent icon. The amalgam of influences prioritizes functionality and efficiency over ornamentation, producing simplified aesthetic combined with technical advancements and ample daylight throughout the building. The focus is on the well-being of the users through vernacular and Western architectural practices.

5. Conclusions

This thesis investigated the socio-political context in Bulgaria related to the women's movement and the architectural legacy situated by notable women architects during the interwar period. The research revealed that social affairs in politics and culture have a direct effect on the progress of women's emancipation. Conservative exclusionary practices, cultural stereotypes and social demoralization were only some of the struggles Bulgarian women had to overcome to establish themselves as active members of the nation. In male-dominated professions, such as architecture, the contribution of women often falls in the shadows of their male colleagues. This thesis paper delved into the architectural qualities of a building designed by two women pioneers - the Sanatorium complex in Raduntsi village in Southern Bulgaria by Victoria Angelova-Vinarova and Mara Zaharieva - to situate the efforts of women in the holistic architectural- and women's movements.

The first chapter discussed the domination of patriarchal systems over public and private spheres after the establishment of the first constitutional monarchy following the independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1878. Uncertainty and instability proved to be essential catalysts for challenging the ingrained power structures towards societal renewal. Women of elite or high-class backgrounds leaped to assert themselves through creating unions, associations and philanthropic work, helping others get educated. The study continues by discussing how the development of the Modernist architectural style clashed with the established Neo-classical and vernacular movements, reflecting the oscillation between modernity and traditions in the new Bulgarian state. Through this paper, it is evident that women were an active part of that discourse, affirming their involvement by contributing with over two hundred built architectural projects throughout Bulgaria. The Sanatorium development is an exceptional example of the unification of Western and Bulgarian architectural languages. Angelova-Vinarova and Zaharieva's focus on pragmatic functionality and user comfort is an inspiring achievement.

There is still a lack of deeper analysis of the qualities of women-led architectural projects. Further research could be established on the basis of documenting and raising awareness for women's contribution to the Modernist Bulgarian architecture of the last century. The review of such projects could bring about higher appreciation for Modernist architecture, and contribute to the on-going discussion of male dominance and gender pay gaps in the architectural field across the world.

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7. Appendix

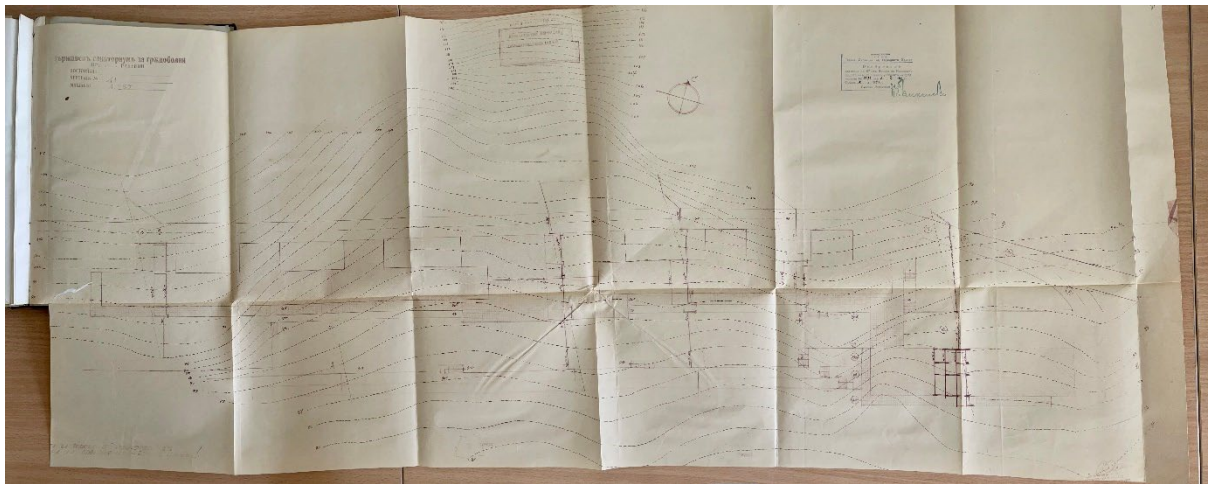


Figure 1 Masterplan and terrain, 1941. found in Central State Archives of Bulgaria, Sofia, Bulgaria.

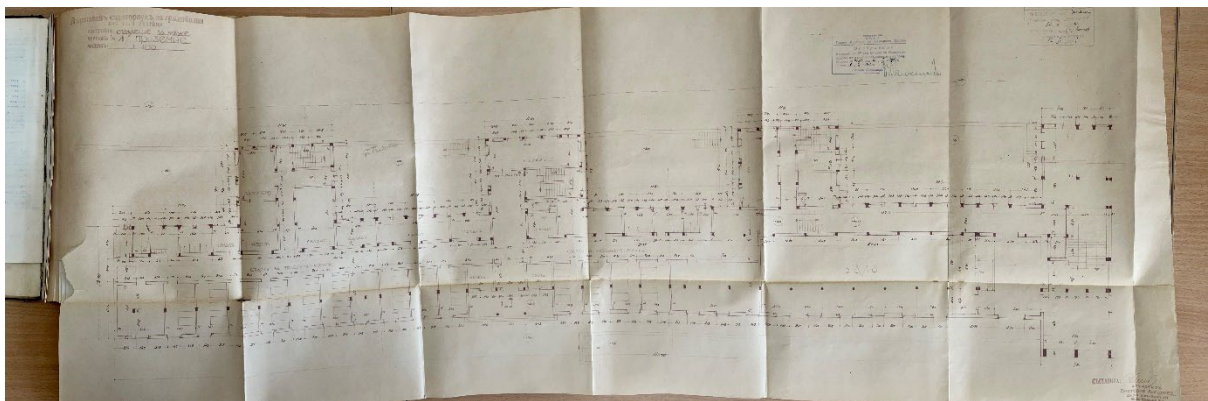


Figure 2 Basement floor plan, 1941. found in Central State Archives of Bulgaria, Sofia, Bulgaria.

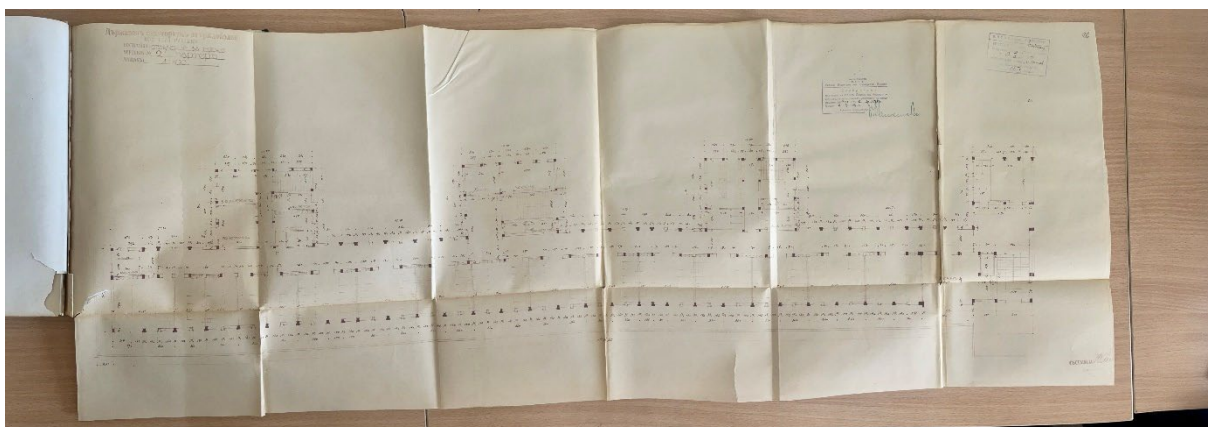


Figure 3 Ground floor plan, 1941. found in Central State Archives of Bulgaria, Sofia, Bulgaria.

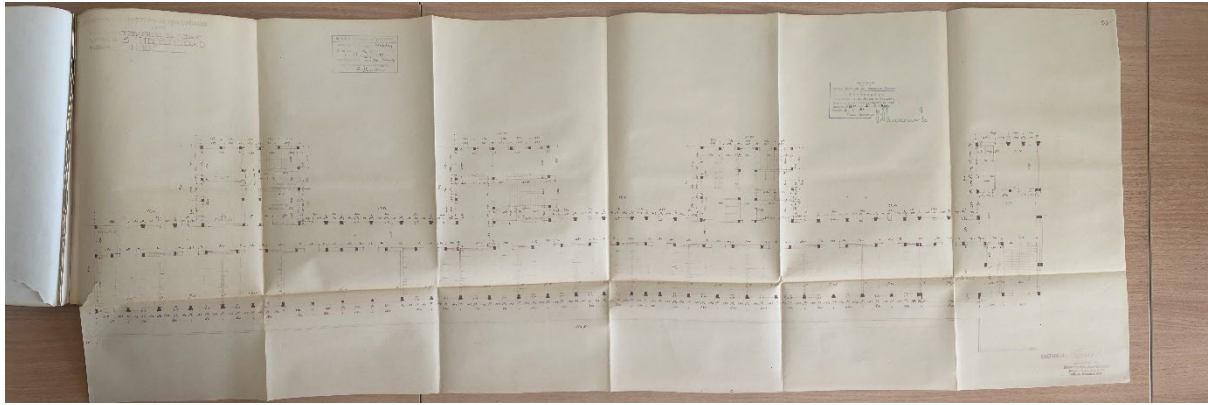


Figure 4 Second floor plan, 1941. found in Central State Archives of Bulgaria, Sofia, Bulgaria.

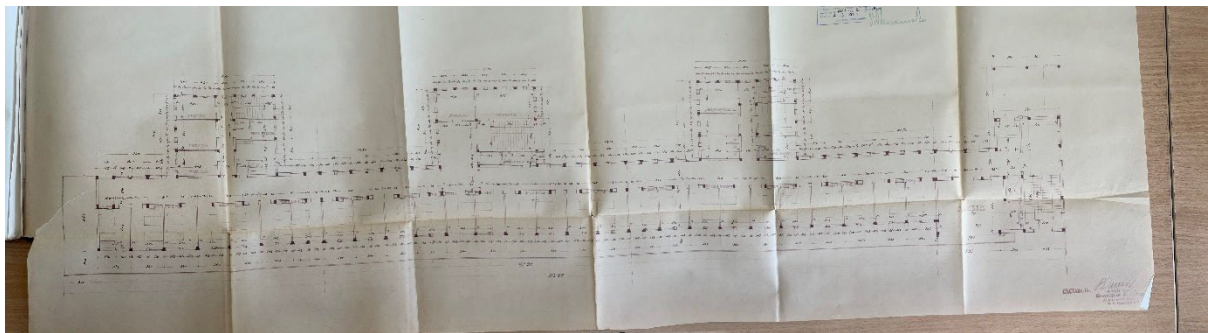


Figure 5 Third floor plan, 1941. found in Central State Archives of Bulgaria, Sofia, Bulgaria.

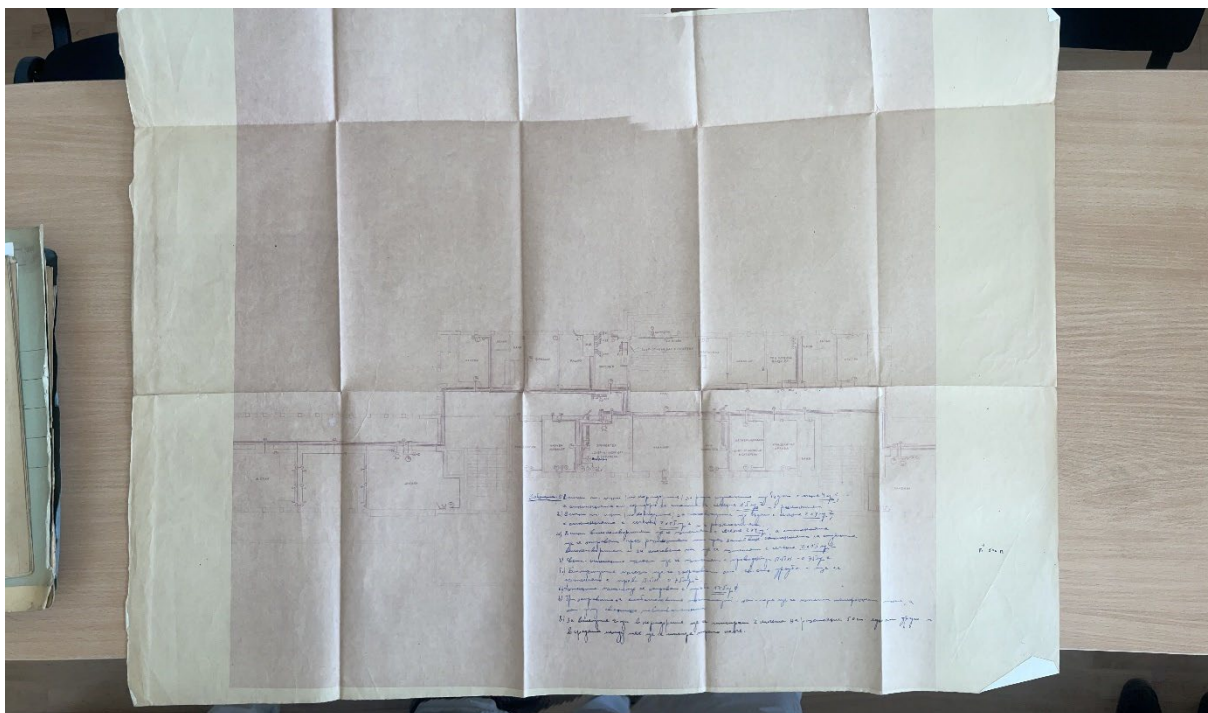


Figure 6 Heating plan ground floor, 1941. found in Central State Archives of Bulgaria, Sofia, Bulgaria.

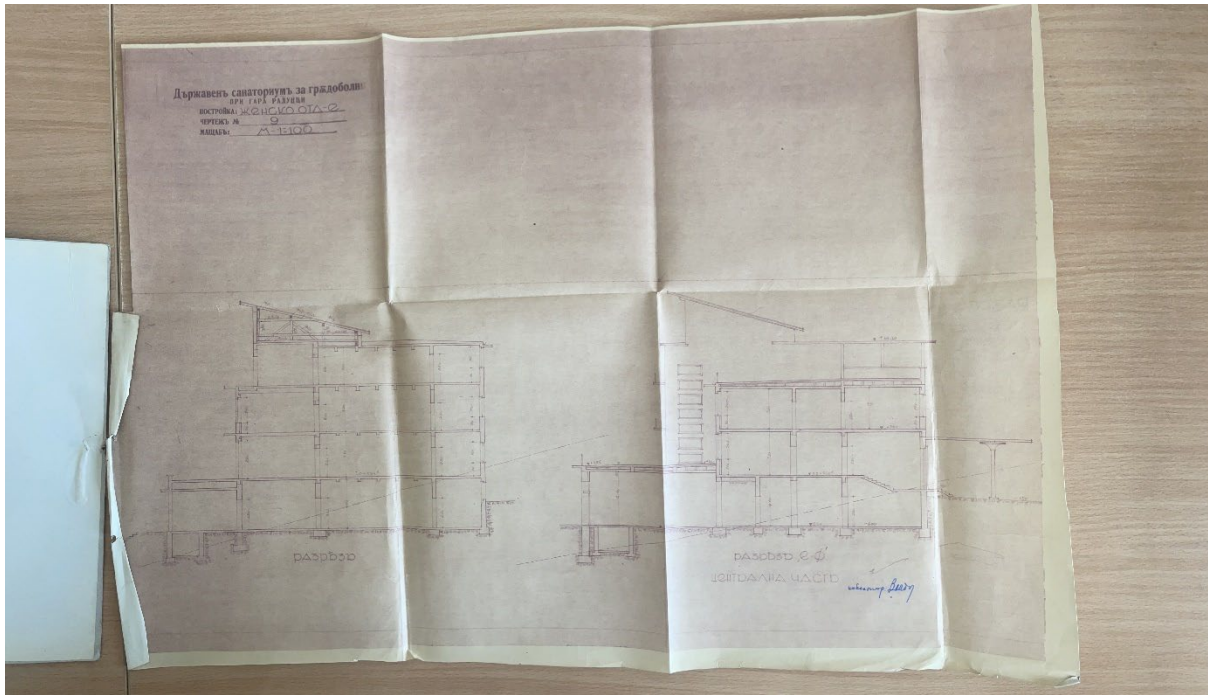


Figure 7 Short section women's wing, 1941. found in Central State Archives of Bulgaria, Sofia, Bulgaria.

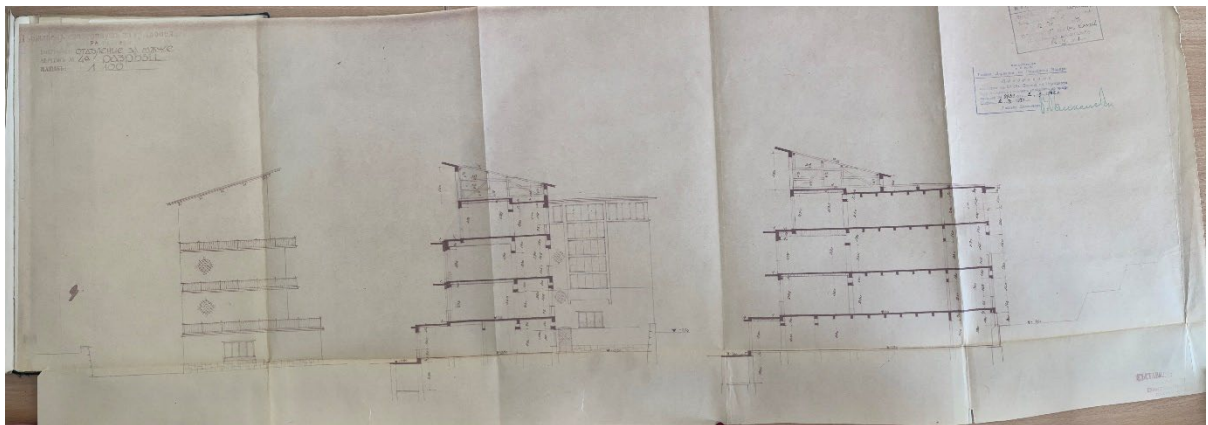


Figure 8 Short section men's wing, 1941. found in Central State Archives of Bulgaria, Sofia, Bulgaria.

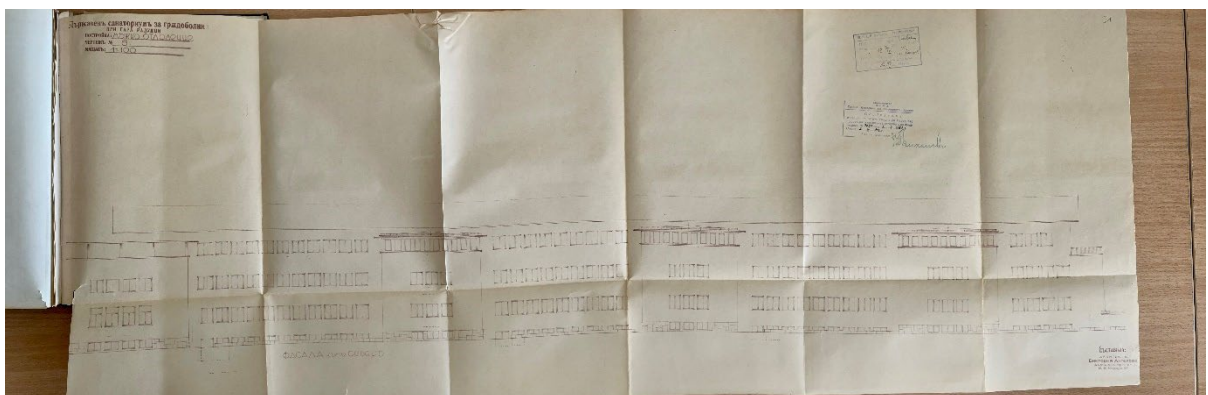


Figure 9 North façade elevation, 1941. found in Central State Archives of Bulgaria, Sofia, Bulgaria.

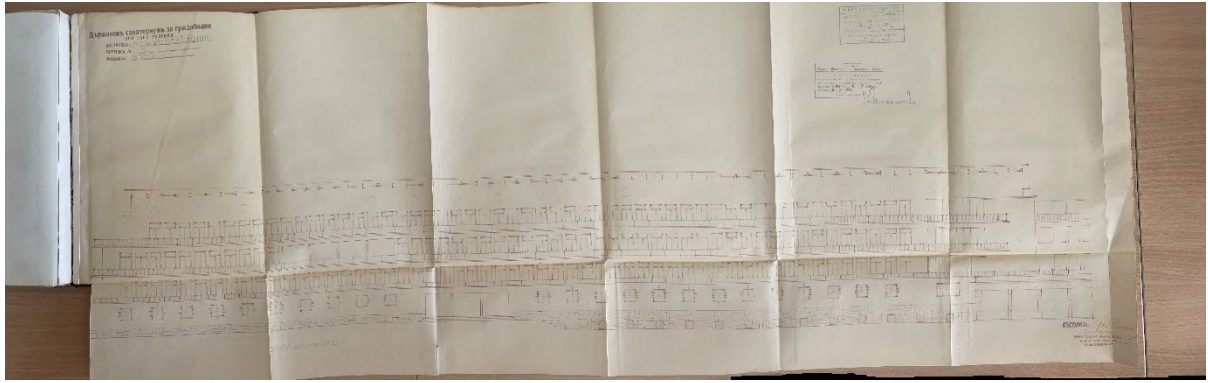


Figure 10 South façade elevation, 1941. found in Central State Archives of Bulgaria, Sofia, Bulgaria.

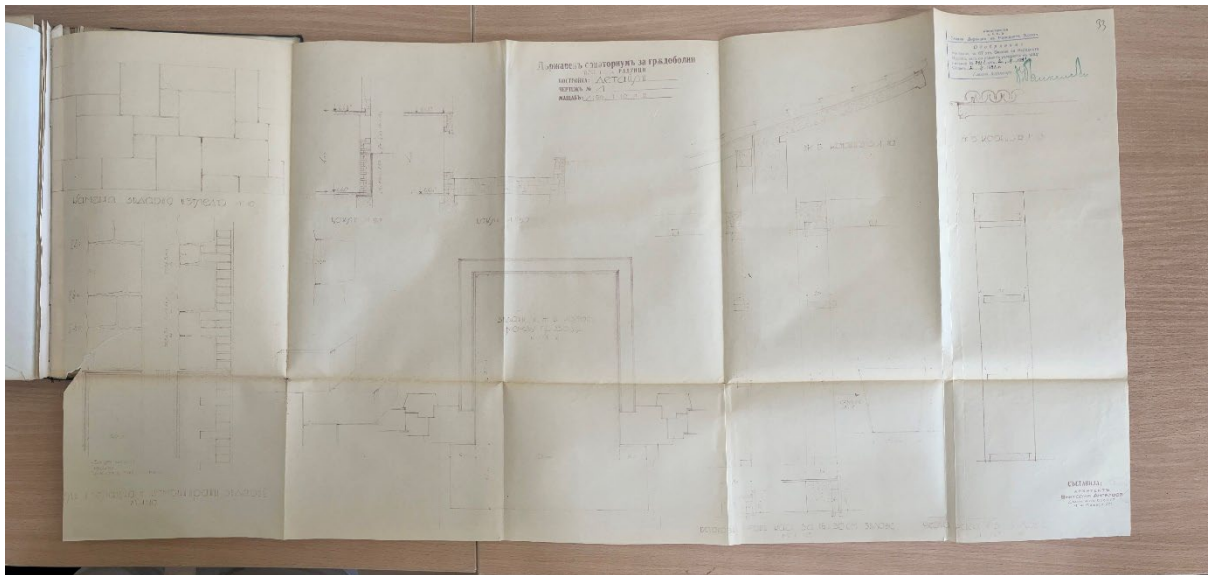


Figure 11 Detail drawing 1, 1941. found in Central State Archives of Bulgaria, Sofia, Bulgaria.

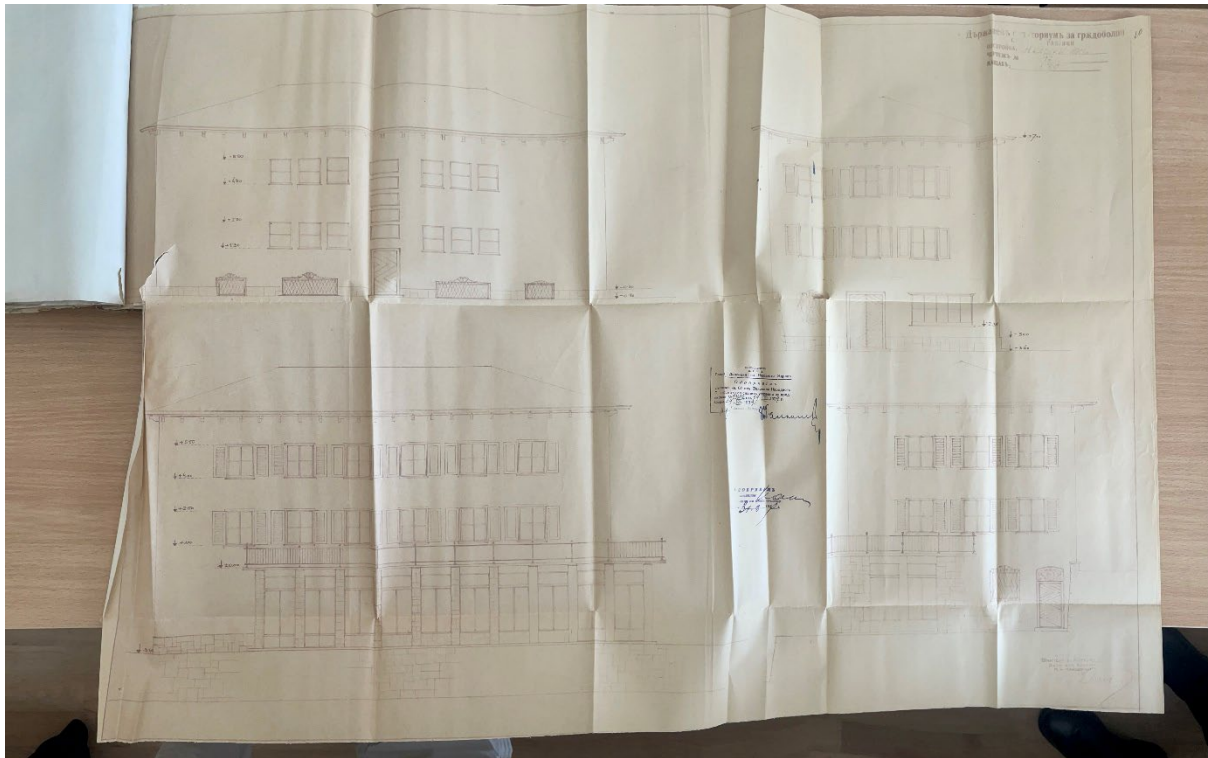


Figure 12 Doctor's building detail drawing, 1941. found in Central State Archives of Bulgaria, Sofia, Bulgaria.

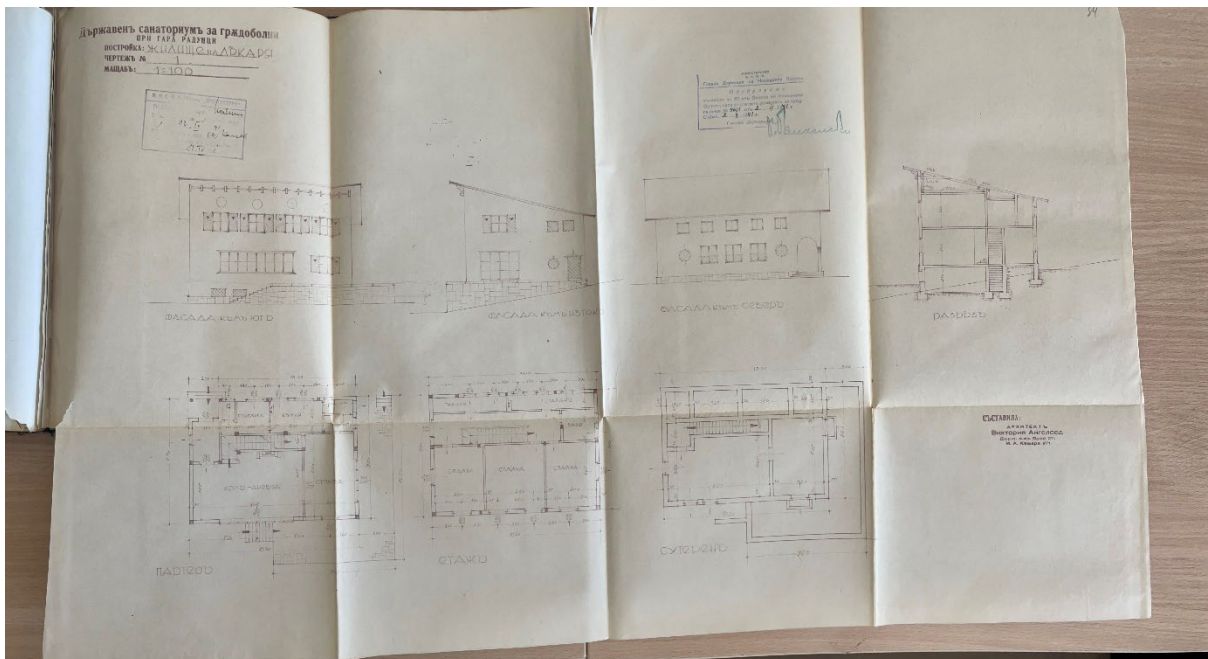


Figure 13 Doctor's house detail drawing, 1941. found in Central State Archives of Bulgaria, Sofia, Bulgaria.

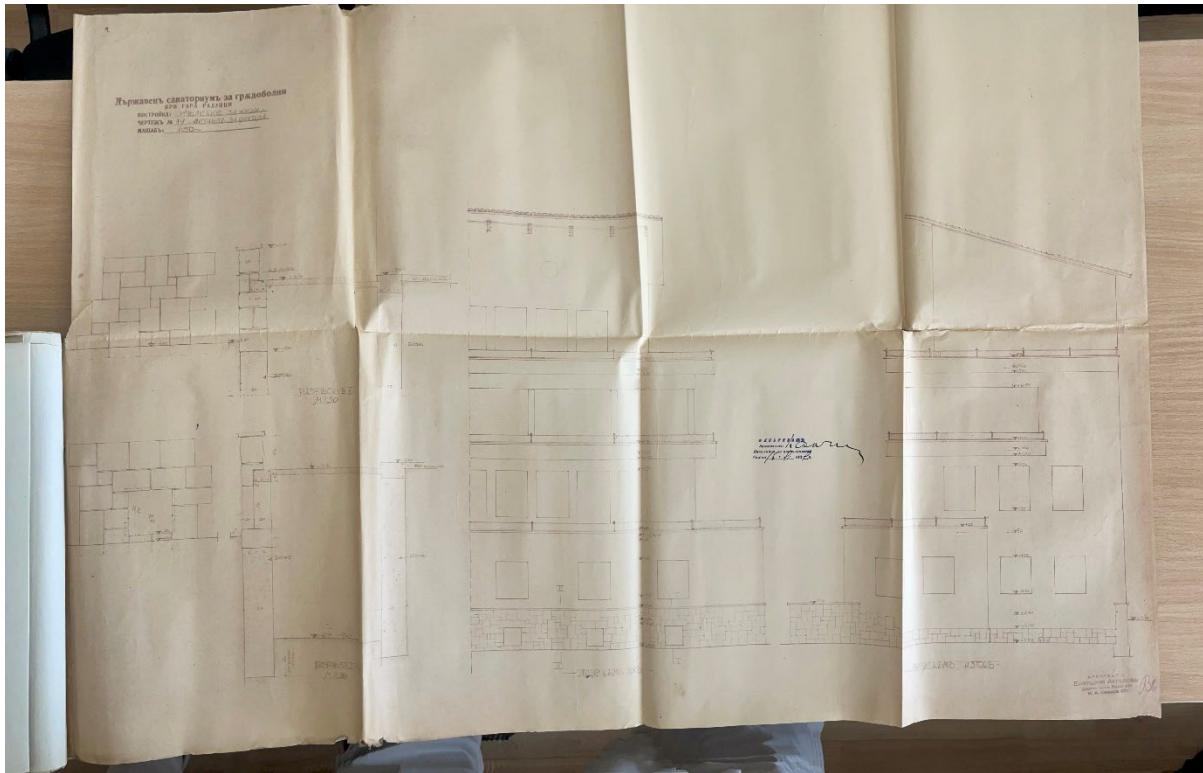


Figure 14 Plinth detail drawing , 1941. found in Central State Archives of Bulgaria, Sofia, Bulgaria.

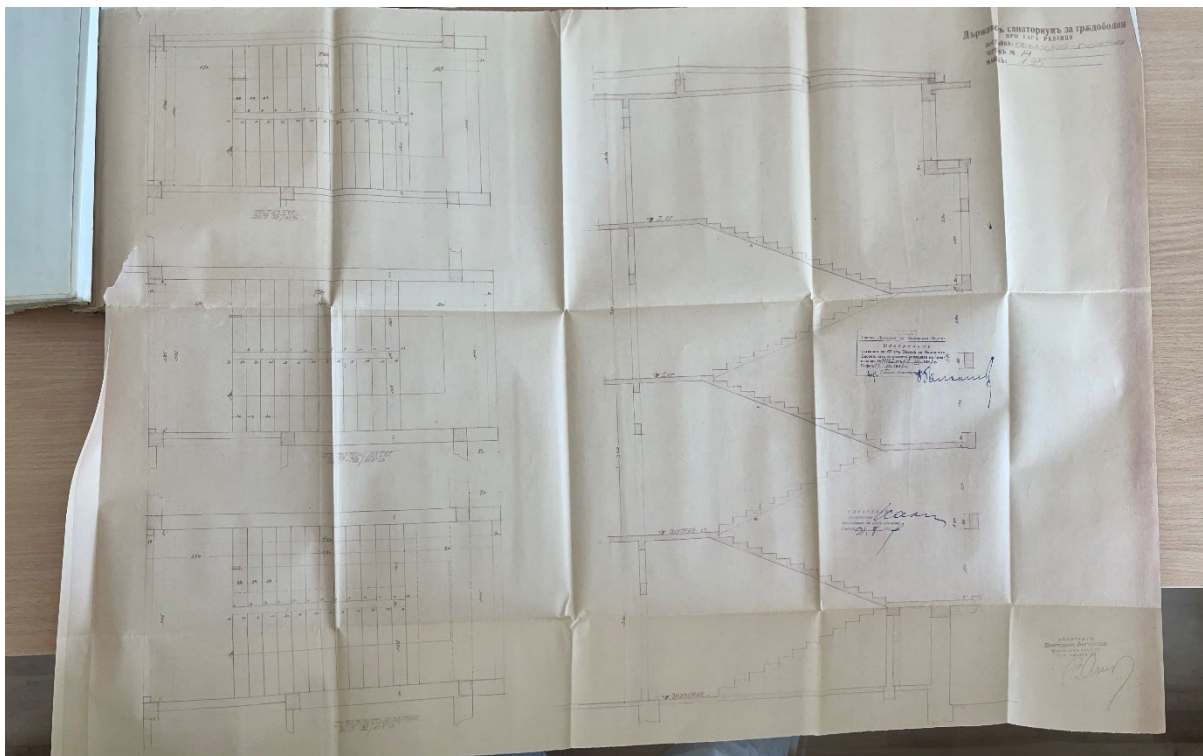


Figure 15 Stair detail drawing, 1941. found in Central State Archives of Bulgaria, Sofia, Bulgaria.