

## **EURORENOVATION (EUROREMONT): The art of concealing**

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### **Abstract**

*Soon after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the phenomenon of Eurorenovation emerged ready to help numerous citizens of the newly established Ukrainian state to get rid of their gloomy past. The movement, disguised as the reorganization of the private space of one's own home, actually functioned as a face-lift and a cover-up of all sorts of problems instead of the much-needed search for solutions. Plastic euro-windows and euro-doors, dropped ceiling and plastic paneling flooded Ukraine, mimicking European design and eventually the lifestyle while effectively ignoring massive infrastructural problems, poverty and the immense gap between a devastated country in transition and a seemingly flourishing Europe. In 2010, R.E.P. group initiated a long-term project called Eurorenovation aiming at identifying symptoms of this process and consequently apprehending Eurorenovation in its complexity in order to be able to describe similar socio-cultural relations in other countries. Over the following years the artists created a series of installations, where they literally copied recognizable trends in the popular interior redesign of Soviet apartments using cheap imported materials. Strange as it may sound, but Europe – Ukraine's role model – may have fallen into the very same trap. A tendency towards the cosmetic concealment of problem areas and patching up instead of coming up with problem-solving methodologies characterizes European governance in recent years. With that said, the Ukrainian know-how could be of practical value as well as the R.E.P. group visual research that convincingly demonstrate the dangers of the Eurorenovation approach.*

**Keywords:** Eurorenovation, mimicry, architecture, decommunisation.

The fastest empirical way to learn about Eurorenovation would be to browse numerous Ukrainian apartment rental websites, where one would find quickly diminishing category of granny's-Soviet-style Khrushchevka, a relatively small category of modern apartments and the seven seas of eurorenovated flats.

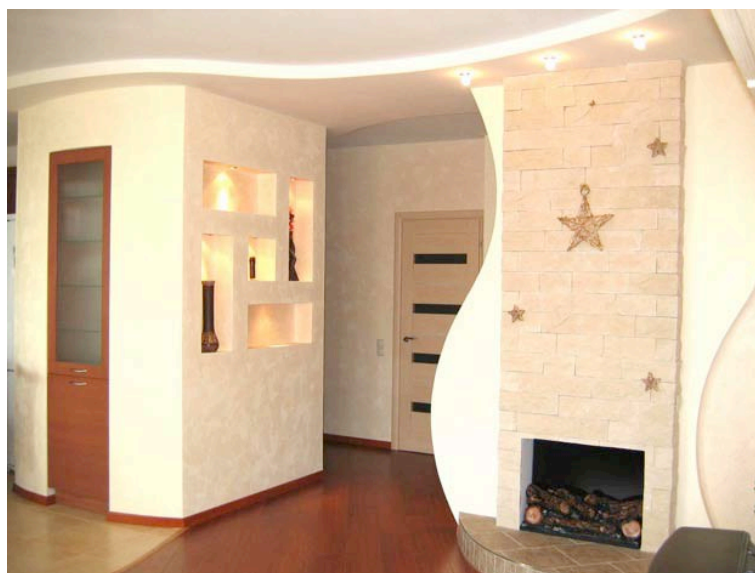
Built in the 60s during Khrushchev's rule, ugly cookie-cutter Khrushchevkas visualized the Soviet idea of equality and unification under which differences were not only inadmissible but also barely impossible to achieve due to the limited market. These cheap block buildings conceived as a temporary solution of housing problem were not meant to last more than 25 years, however, to this day most Khrushchevkas have never been replaced and, as the saying goes, there is nothing more permanent than temporary. Understandably, time left its mark on them and already in 90s a prompt renovation has been required. This is one of the reasons why Eurorenovation became a predominant architectural and interior design style in all post-Soviet countries. Initially as a temporary solution in anticipation of overhaul maintenance. Aesthetically after the fall of the Iron Wall thirsty for changes and striving for Western way of life those who failed tried to imitate the latest at any costs. But they didn't know very much about real Western life, so they created some strange copy, which to Western people seems like a bit of a caricature. The hallmarks of Eurorenovation are cheap materials, replaceable surfaces, drywall and plastic, plastic euro-windows and euro-doors, fake stucco molding, dropped ceiling, predominant colour – beige. It was an embodiment of a cheap dream, the temptation of advertising, physically displacing an unworthy reality. At the same time these techniques served to conceal unrepairable and uneven walls – the results of rushed mass-production of the 60s.



**Figure 1.** Cherepanova U. (1960s), *Doppelganger*: Krokodil (Crocodile) magazine. The series of caricatures illustrating Khrushchevka's paradoxes. Even at the moment of their construction block buildings were heavily criticized and ridiculed for poor soundproofing, ugly design and the low quality of used materials

Eventually, the plague of Eurorenovation has become a lifestyle or even an operational paradigm, not just an interior design solution of practical matters. It invaded TV programs and fashion as much as public politics. Gimmick mimicry, false façades with no foundation, and cosmetic renovations instead of drastic actions were exercised in various fields characterizing a new era. Although Western and namely European values had always been triggering, the Eurorenovation processes owning a debt of its name to Europe. As in many other cases and disciplines in Ukraine, initially good intentions of catching and grading up with Europe turned out to be a sheer imitation of reforms, democratisation of society and adoption of the Euro-integration path. The omnipresent corruption still intoxicates multiple sectors of the economy and private life of the people, but, thanks to the art of camouflage, the country looks quite modernized and "European".

With time, the former Soviet Union countries drifted apart, irretrievably pursuing each its own path, however it would not be too much of a generalization to say that they are still by and large governed by double standards – a glossy façade often contradicts the back stage hideousness.



**Figure 2.** An example of Eurorenovation interior taken from an interior design website. The title of the article is *What is Eurorenovation?* and it briefly explains what the term means. Source: <https://dom.ria.com/uk/articles/chto-takoe-evroremont-173890.html>

Arguably infamous decommunisation can be analysed through the Eurorenovation prism too. The laws of decommunisation had been adopted by the Parliament on April 9th, 2015, and, ever since its legalisation, the witch-hunt has been fully embraced and put in practice by Ukrainian bureaucrats and activists. At first, with the wiping out of Lenin's monuments, the prosecuting pursuit soon touched upon everything that contained Soviet symbols and could be supposedly classified as Communist propaganda. The cities, villages, and streets received new names, such as one of the most populated cities in eastern Ukraine – Dnipropetrovsk, which was renamed Dnipro. The second part of the compound word had referred to the name of the Bolshevik and Soviet Communist Party leader Grigory Petrovsky, who became one of the masterminds of the Holodomor artificial famine in Ukraine in 1932-1933. Hence in their pursuit of the new, stripped of dubious past identity, Ukrainians resorted to violent, uncivilized and expectedly thoughtless methods suspiciously resembling

those of Eurorenovation. It's only the façade that has to be face-lifted and covered-up, although the Soviet mindset doesn't go away that easily. As of spring 2019, over one thousand settlements were renamed and approximately 2,5 thousand communist monuments dismantled.



**Figure 3.** The equestrian statue of Nikolay Shchors, Kyiv (2016). Ukrainian authorities decided to camouflage the monument by wrapping it up with enormous bicolour — blue and yellow — fabric, resembling the national Ukrainian flag. As the turn of events follows, the cover-up was done in order to eliminate the allegedly displeasing monuments during the Independence Day celebration (!), while, at the same time, to decorate the city with a much more cherished and pride-inducing national symbol. Four years later, the blue and yellow semi-transparent cube, with the easily recognisable equestrian silhouette inside of it, is still there. Photo by Yevgen Nikiforov

It comes as no surprise that the phenomenon of Eurorenovation caught the attention of the back-then-young members of R.E.P. group, which formed during social protests and whose collaboration was forged by the Orange Revolution (2004). Accordingly, socio-political issues have been the core of their artistic practice, which, at the very beginning, they also successfully combined with activism.

In 2010, R.E.P. initiated a long-term project called *Eurorenovation* aiming at identifying symptoms of this process and consequently apprehending Eurorenovation in its complexity in order to be able to describe similar socio-cultural relations in other countries. Over the following years the artists created a series of installations, where they literally copied recognizable trends in the

popular interior redesign of Soviet apartments using cheap imported materials. For the first iteration of the project at Kunstraum in Munich, R.E.P. invited and interviewed a professional decorator who deals with Eurorenovation all the time. Ultimately, the work consisted of the video in which the decorator described the style and provided some historical background as well as an interior designed by her. Since then, the group has produced more than five iterations of the project, always tuning it to the current political situation or commenting on working conditions in cultural sector etc.



**Figure 4.** R.E.P. (revolutionary experimental space) *Eurorenovation. Cut*, 2012. This installation explores the ways post-Soviet spaces are converted following an aesthetic that from an old soviet perspective appears to be in a Western style

According to group member Nikita Kadan, by scrutinizing various manifestations of Eurorenovation, they seek to analyse genuine Ukrainian context but also:

By putting the accent on the subjectivities of post-Soviet space, we argue that it is not merely some caricatured and grotesque object for observation and that it has its own perspective on the West. And we want to show the West (in the West) the East's view of the West. So we put up not one mirror, but two. And they reflect one another. One is located in post-Soviet space, the other in the so-called free, united Europe. And we create a situation of innumerable reciprocal reflections that with every change of context reveal new images (Kadan, 2011).

Thus for R.E.P. group the phenomenon of Eurorenovation applied to the analysis of social life opens up a broader discussion on the process of Ukraine's post-Soviet transformation into a western neoliberal state. In a conversation that took place in 2015, the group members expressed hope that after the Revolution of Dignity, which is undeniably one of the most important political events in the history of Modern Europe, the phenomenon of Eurorenovation will subside. Resorting to the language of architecture, which is the framework of this paper, the barricades on Maidan Square symbolized pure, genuine aspiration for freedom and negation of all-permeating hypocrisy. Made of found materials and serving exclusively utilitarian goals, the tents and barricades were supposed to cancel the Eurorenovation forever.

But from the Kyiv city center, the front line moved to Eastern Ukraine, where war with the Russia-backed terrorists is ongoing. The clear example of Eurorenovation mindset there is the so-called Minsk Protocol – an agreement to halt the war in the Donbas region, signed by representatives of Ukraine, the Russian Federation, the Donetsk People's Republic and the Luhansk People's Republic on 5 September 2014. The agreement, signed under the auspices of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), has totally failed to stop the fighting. And yet, it is constantly being referred to by the Russian Federation as a viable solution. The Steinmeier Formula is a more recent example of this illusion at play. Steinmeier's formula calls for elections to be held in the separatist-held territories under Ukrainian legislation and the supervision of the OSCE. If the OSCE judges the balloting to be free and fair, then a special self-governing status for the territories will be initiated and Ukraine will be returned control of its easternmost border. In this case again, in accordance with OSCE rules and regulations, elections cannot take place in territories where regular troops are stationed. However, OSCE is ready to neglect the rules in favour of Russia, showing capitulating instead of principled stance.

Allegedly these, as much as many other recent actions of Europe, are doubtful and problematic as well as hypocritical. They are merely directed toward fortifying the spirit and creating a feeling that everything is alright, building up the false façade of welfare and justice. And so the process and purpose of

Eurorenovation is a powerful metaphor for the aforementioned geopolitical positioning of contemporary Europe. This early post-Soviet phenomenon rooted in the admiration of a just as well culturally and economically superior Europe has made its way back to the founder.

It remains unclear what is to be spotted in this situation of innumerable reciprocal reflections Kadan referred to describing Eurorenovation project's aim.

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