WORLD MONUMENTS FUND IN RUSSIA
Russia holds an enduring fascination for architectural conservationists. The periods of perestroika and glasnost have revealed a country that has fought, often on limited resources, to preserve its vast architectural heritage. In the aftermath of the Second World War, if those in the West saw a razed area as an opportunity to build something modern, in the East it was often viewed as a chance to re-create something that was lost. Just outside St. Petersburg, the destroyed Pavlosk Palace and the Catherine Palace in Tsarskoye Selo, and the even grander Peterhof Palace were painstakingly re-constructed at a time when the country had no means to do so.

When the World Monuments Fund embarked on its first Russian projects in 1996, it made sense to start in St. Petersburg, Peter the Great’s city, a vast drawing board for European architects from Domenico Trezzini to Carlo Rossi. A paucity of compromising development makes the city a museum of architecture. This legacy is due in part to the city state inspectorate, the St. Petersburg Committee for the Preservation of Historical and Cultural Monuments (KGIOP), with whom WMF has worked closely over the past decade. Last year though, KGIOP, and Mikhail Piotrovsky, Di-
rector of the Hermitage, were prompted for the first time to compile a list of recent unsympathetic modern buildings suitable for demolition. This is timely, St. Petersburg is currently facing some dilemmas over some major construction projects; notably the Maryinsky 2 project by French architect Dominique Perrault—an extension of the Maryinsky Theater, home of the world famous Kirov Ballet, among others. WMF has worked on some high-profile sites in and around the city starting with the Alexander Palace at Tsarskoye Selo, the Boat House at Yelagin Palace on Yelagin Island, and Catherine the Great’s Chinese Palace at Oranienbaum overlooking the Bay of Finland. While initial support for these restorations has come primarily from American donors, European benefactors have begun to step forward, seeing the value in preserving such important architectural masterpieces. In some cases WMF’s contribution to these projects, all of which have been monitored and approved by KGIOP, has leveraged state funding for their restoration.

While St. Petersburg has worked diligently to maintain its extraordinary architectural legacy, the same cannot be said for that of Moscow, which spans the twelfth century to the twentieth. The city has witnessed the destruction of more than 2,000 significant historic buildings to make way for redevelopment in the past ten years, a process fueled by the city’s booming economy, which has hastened new construction “like mushrooms after rain,” according to locals. Buildings that have been spared, have been subjected to inappropriate restoration, or have been left to languish to hasten their dereliction and razing. This phenomenon is particularly disturbing in light of the fact that just last year Russian President Vladmir Putin drew up a list of 80,000 historical monuments throughout the country that are entitled to government protection—only 35 percent of which are in a stable condition—calling for far more private investment in preservation.

With the world’s largest country currently preoccupied with negotiating the price of stability over democracy, a dialogue over a shared heritage and a basis for common understanding seems as pertinent as ever. To this end, WMF New York, along with its European office in Paris, and its energetic affiliate WMF in Britain, has developed a portfolio of projects in Moscow, ranging from the seventeenth-century New Jerusalem Monastery at Istra, which reproduces the topography and edifices of the Holy Land to powerful and intriguing effect to Konstantin Melnikov’s House and Studio, a symbol of the 1920s
Constructivist Movement (see page 32). This follows WMF’s financial support of work on a new roof for another Melinkov landmark, the Russakov Club, in 1998. In addition, WMF has supported a number restoration projects, including those of the Gonzaga Theater at Arkhangelskoye, an eighteenth-century estate built by French architects for the Golitsyn and subsequently Yusupov families. It is hoped that recent successful fundraising for Ostankino Palace, the remarkably well-preserved Cheremetiev estate, located north of Moscow (see page 28), will start the long process of its proper restoration in 2007.

Beyond Moscow and St. Petersburg, WMF has supported the launch of restoration work at the magnificent onion-domed wooden churches at Kondopoga and Kizhi—the latter a seventeenth-century 22-domed church built using mortise-and-tenon joinery—as well as a spectacular array of vernacular wooden houses and domed ecclesiastical structures in the village of Rostov Veliky, located on Russia’s famed Golden Ring of medieval monasteries. The organization has also supported exterior restoration work at Alvar Aalto’s Viipuri Library in Karelia.

Since WMF’s first Watch list was issued in 1996, the organization has campaigned for the preservation of Russian masterpieces of functionalist architecture from the 1920s and 1930s. Ironically, the architecture of this period has proven to be the most vulnerable of all. In answer to calls for help on this front, WMF is supporting a major conference this April at the Moscow Architecture Museum that addresses the threats to that city’s twentieth-century architecture. From our experience, it is clear that Russia does not want for technical expertise, but advocacy, encouragement, and financial assistance. State architectural conservation bodies in that country are often pessimistic about their ability to effect change as they watch their power being eroded by commerce. By continuing its involvement in Russia at this critical time, an international organization like WMF can help their Russian colleagues by championing their cause.

—Will Black, Bertrand du Vignaud, & John H. Stubbs for WMF