



HISTORIC MOSCOW UNDER SEIGE

Despite its rich architectural legacy, Moscow is losing much of its historic fabric to development.

by EDMUND HARRIS

It ought to be inconceivable that a city with as rich an architectural legacy as Moscow could continue to lose so many of its historic buildings, having already lost so much of its cultural heritage during the twentieth century. Yet that is precisely what is happening—photographs taken of streets and buildings in the center of town as recently as last summer are already historic views.

Much of the destruction can be attributed to the city's robust economy, which has spawned a boom in the real estate market on an unprecedented scale. With property values on the rise, it seems that any piece of land suitable for development is up for grabs, including many properties listed as historic sites. Although legislation protecting historic buildings is, on paper, very good, it is often ignored by those issuing development permits. Moreover, there also has been an inability to recognize that preserving the character of an historic streetscape is just as important as conserving its individual buildings. This is an especially important issue in Moscow, which, unlike most Russian cities, has retained its irregular medieval radial street plan that emanates from the Kremlin. As the areas nearest the city center are the most desirable, available real estate there commands a premium, putting its historic structures in the greatest jeopardy.

Clearly, the best-known landmarks such as the Kremlin and St. Basil's Cathedral are not at risk. Seen with the other surviving architectural landmarks of the city, they are also testament to an age when Moscow was a coherent whole, exhibiting a unique blend of indigenous Russian styles and Byzantine and Classical influences. Around the turn of the twentieth century, a large number of luxury apartment buildings were erected in Moscow, which coincided with the flourishing of the Russian Art Nouveau and a brief neoclassical revival. Together with architectural treasures of earlier ages, they represent a distinctive and very important part of the city's architectural heritage. Yet today, many of these buildings face an uncertain future—having fallen into decay and now threatened with demolition or inappropriate restoration.

Following the Revolution of 1917, Moscow went from being the second city of the Russian Empire to being the capital of the Soviet Union and, with the exception of the Great Fire of 1812, underwent major architectural changes for the first time since the seventeenth century. In order to give the city an appearance commensurate with its new status and new ideology, a comprehensive program of demolition and reconstruction began. For those historic buildings that were spared, the changes were hardly less traumatic. At that time, all existing real estate was nationalized and residential

property was reorganized to ease an acute housing shortage. Much of Moscow's pre-Revolutionary housing stock was communalized—several families would be accommodated in a single apartment or house, one to a room with shared facilities. Subsequent residential construction generally consisted of building anew with minimal maintenance carried out on pre-existing housing.

Today, many of these communalized buildings are now in poor condition. Those that have been “decommunalized” in recent years are for the most part in private hands such as Ulitsa Pokrovka 29, a complex of apartment buildings built in 1897 by Lev Kekushev, a leading architect of Moscow Art Nouveau. Yet private ownership does not necessarily guarantee preservation. When an investor showed interest in redeveloping Ulitsa Pokrovka 29, residents of the building mounted a legal challenge. Although demolition has thus far been avoided, such cases are all too common.

Where historic buildings have been spared, conservation work is often carried out with little regard to authenticity. Such has been the case with Catherine the Great's palace at Tsaritsyno, construction of which was begun by Vasily Bazhenov in 1775 and continued a decade later by Matvei Kazakov. Work stopped in 1793, however, before the building could be completed. Sometime later, the roof either collapsed or was dismantled, and the palace was left to decay until last year, at which time the Russian authorities decided to finish the building for use as a museum. Although a consultation of archive materials would have made it possible to undertake an authentic reconstruction of the palace, a metal substructure of the roof, already visible, attests a radical departure from traditional building methods. Work at Tsaritsyno is reminiscent of that recently carried out at the Manezh—a covered riding school and later an exhibition hall—built in a neoclassical style between 1817 and 1825 and gutted by fire in March 2004. Here too reconstruction work was done using modern techniques and with substantial modifications to the original design so that it could resume life as an exhibition venue.

Only a fraction of the 800 or so churches and chapels built in the pre-Revolutionary city were allowed to function during the Soviet era. Those that survived were secularized and often disfigured



THE LATE BAROQUE CHURCH OF ST. CLEMENT, BUILT BETWEEN 1756 AND 1769, IS OCCUPIED IN LARGE PART BY THE RESERVE BOOK STACKS OF THE STATE LENIN LIBRARY, WHICH HAVE PUT EXCESS STRAIN ON THE VAULTS OF THE UNDERCROFT AND CAUSED STRUCTURAL DAMAGE. WORK STOPPED ON CATHERINE THE GREAT'S PALACE AT TSARITSYNO, FACING PAGE, IN 1793, BEFORE IT COULD BE COMPLETED. THE PALACE IS NOW BEING “FINISHED” USING MODERN CONSTRUCTION METHODS FOR USE AS AN ART GALLERY.



by the addition of extra floors and the dismantlement of domes and bell towers. Fortunately, some of these sanctuaries may see a brighter future with the recent restitution of religious properties to the Russian Orthodox Church, which has embarked on an ambitious restoration program. Already, several badly disfigured churches have been superbly resurrected. Yet rescuing these buildings is an expensive proposition, often beyond the means of the congregations that support them.

Although examples of quality restoration do exist in Moscow, they are few and far between. Two important Art Nouveau buildings in central Moscow by Fyodor Shekhtel—the Utro Rossii newspaper printing house of 1909 and the Levenson printing works of 1900—for example have recently been restored and successfully converted into a restaurant-cum-entertainment complex and conference center respectively.

The Moscow city government is beginning to realize that tourists might wish to linger in the center to enjoy a streetscape of historic buildings. It recently launched the so-called Zolotoye Koltso Moskvy (Golden Ring of Moscow) project, which calls for the streets encircling the Kremlin to be pedestrianized. However, the seriousness of the lack of effective heritage protection cannot be overlooked. Moscow still has enough historic buildings to be worthy of calling itself an historic city, but unless the brakes can be put on unbridled development, that reserve is ever closer to being exhausted. ■



A NINETEENTH-CENTURY HOUSE, ABOVE LEFT, WAS CAREFULLY RESTORED, WHILE THE MANEZH, WHICH BURNED IN 2004, WAS QUICKLY REBUILT AS AN EXHIBITION HALL.