



# THE BELL TOLLS FOR MOSCOW'S MODERNIST MASTERWORKS

by CLEMENTINE CECIL

Moscow's Modernist legacy is one of the finest in the world, but also one of the most neglected. Built in the feverish early years of the revolution, the buildings are experimental in form and materials and presented Moscow with dramatic silhouettes to mark the new era of socialism. However, despite their aesthetic power and historical importance, more than 70 years of poor maintenance and ill-use have deformed many of these buildings and led others to near collapse. An indication of the critical nature of the situation are the inclusion of two of Moscow's Modernist landmarks on WMF's 2006 list of *100 Most Endangered Sites* and an international conference in Moscow, *Heritage at Risk*, which will be held this April.

Architecture fans visiting Moscow are often surprised to find that the majority of the city's Modernist buildings have either fallen into ruin or have been disfigured by inappropriate use and insensitive rehabilitations. Visitors to Paris who want to see Le Corbusier's work can visit the Fondation where they will receive information about his buildings, which they will find pristine and well maintained. Significant Soviet architects such as Konstantin Melnikov, or Moisei Ginzburg, have no such representation in Moscow. Indeed, visitors will be hard-pressed to even find their buildings, so crowded are they by new developments of the last 15 years, and in conditions which are anything but their intended pristine appearance.

The present state of the Narkomfin building, which has been included on WMF's Watch list three times—in 2002, 2004, and 2006—is the most graphic example of the result of these problems. Built between 1928 and 1930 by Moisei Ginzburg and Ignatii Milinis for employees of the National Finance Ministry, the Narkomfin is a seminal document in the history of architecture, having served as the model for Le Corbusier's *Unité D'Habitation* (see page 30). Designed according to Le Corbusier's principles—house on pillar supports, supporting frame, wall-screens, horizontal windows, open planning, flat functional roofs—the building

predates Le Corbusier's vertical city. According to some, the young French architect asked Ginzburg for copies of the layouts of the duplex apartments, which he took back to Paris and from them developed his revolutionary designs.

Despite its importance, the building is in desperate need of restoration. Its ceiling is leaking and the walls are at the point of falling away due to water damage. Set slightly back from the Garden Ring Road in central Moscow, Narkomfin, which is wedged between the American embassy and a new shopping center, stands in melancholy abandonment. Vegetation grows out of its walls and roof, and cardboard replaces glass in its horizontal windows. Despite these poor conditions, half of its 56 apartments are still inhabited.

Moisei Ginzburg's grandson, architect Alexei Ginzburg, has drawn up a restoration plan for the building, which ensures that the original layout is retained. He suggests that the building becomes

**MOSCOW'S MODERNIST LEGACY INCLUDES KONSTANTIN MELNIKOV'S HOUSE-STUDIO, FACING PAGE, THE NARKOMFIN BUILDING, BELOW, AND THE MOSCOW PLANETARIUM, RIGHT. ALL ARE THREATENED BY DEVELOPMENT.**

an apartment-hotel, or continues to be an apartment block. The expense of any restoration project here is vastly increased by the necessity of rehousing the some 26 families who still live there. The building is owned by the city authorities and listed on a local level. Periodically a company buys the rights to restore the building, but drops out when they realize the complications. While the fate of this seminal building is debated, it continues to deteriorate.

Modernism fell out of favor with the ascent of Stalin, who sought a more opulent, classical architectural style to reflect the relative economic stability of his rule, following the shortages of the twenties. Buildings like Narkomfin were reminiscent of the instability of the early years of revolution; the style was officially rejected and the buildings were modified. For example, Narkomfin was originally on pillar supports, but under Stalin the ground floor was filled in and offices installed in these new spaces. Experimental materials were no longer deemed necessary, as there was money to spend on construction, one of Stalin's favorite activities.

Many architects easily slipped into the new style, especially the older ones who had classical training before the revolution. But not all were willing to do so, such as Konstantin Melnikov, who achieved international fame with his Soviet pavilion at the 1925 Paris Exhibition, which won the Grand Prix.

Melnikov's building contracts dried up in the early thirties and he was forbidden to travel abroad, and so unable to attend the Milan Triennale in 1933 where his work was exhibited along with the great architects of the day. Instead, Melnikov retreated into the house-studio he built for himself in central Moscow. This building (1927-1929) was one of few private houses built under Communism and is one of the great international icons of Modernism. Like Narkomfin, this building is on the



WMF's 2006 Watch list. New development in the area has affected ground water conditions, leading to the undermining of the building's foundations. As a result cracks are seen in the walls and roof. An inappropriate restoration in the nineties has also led to further defects. Viktor Melnikov, the architect's son, created an informal house-museum to his father after his death in 1974: the candles and some dried flowers from his parents wedding still stand before the icon in the downstairs parlor; his father's paints and brushes are scattered across a desk in the upstairs studio.

Viktor Melnikov died February 5 this year, leaving his half of the house to the Russian state with the stipulation that it should be kept as a house-museum. The Schusev State Architecture Museum had already begun work on cataloging the Melnikov archive before Viktor's death. A court case on March 16th resolved a long-running family dispute over ownership. The other half of the house has been bought by Russian Senator Sergey Gordeev, a former property developer. He has said that he wants to help the Russian state create a museum in the building and is aware of the need for restoration. The appearance of an individual with a passion for the avant garde who is willing to invest in restoration, could secure a brighter future for these buildings. The Moscow Architecture Preservation Society (MAPS) is monitoring the situation.

Although radical in appearance, and reminiscent of American grain silos, peasant construction techniques were employed in the building of the house. Melnikov himself was from a peasant family and therefore familiar with such methods. Large internal, light-filled spaces were possible thanks to innovative building techniques introduced by the architect such as self-reinforcing concrete floors built in a waffle-like grid. According to Russian peasant traditions, the Melnikov family slept together in one room on the first floor, divided by slender partitions.

Melnikov was also the architect of several Workers' Clubs in Moscow,





# THE HOUSE THAT KONSTANTIN BUILT

For more than three decades, Viktor Melnikov, son of architect Konstantin Melnikov, curated his father's extraordinary house-studio, regaling visitors with stories of his father's life and infusing the house with a powerful atmosphere of twentieth-century Moscow in all its tragedy and poetry. ICON contributor Clementine Cecil, head of the Moscow Architectural Preservation Society (MAPS), caught up with Melnikov this past winter, only weeks before he died on February 5, 2006 at the age of 91. It would be his last interview.

*ICON: How long have you lived here?*

VM: I have lived here since autumn 1929, two years after construction began—we moved in November. So now its 76 years. Papa passed away in 1974 and for 31 years I have maintained the building for the state, for the motherland, for Russia, on my pension.

*ICON: Do you get many visitors?*

VM: Constantly. People come to visit the house from all over the world. Every week I get a phone call or a ring on the front gate. There are Spaniards, Dutch, Italians, Germans, English, and Americans. I don't let large groups in but sometimes I have to—two or three people at a time.

*ICON: Has the area changed since the house was built?*

VM: Under the present mayor, huge houses have gone up all round the house, which is awful—before the sky was visible through most of the windows and the house was full of light. Now we see brick walls. I sleep down here on the ground floor, but the new Russians around here don't let me sleep—they are always working on their homes. They have no conscience. Above the bed, the plaster has fallen away from the ceiling. One night I thought I had left the cabbage on the stove in the kitchen so I went in to look and as soon as I left the room the plaster fell all over the bed. I haven't slept in the bedroom [upstairs] since 1941. I don't go out much. I only go to the shop when it is absolutely necessary. I don't see well and I'm frightened of falling over.

*ICON: Tell us about your father.*

VM: He dreamt about building this house since his childhood. It is his last piece of work. He never received any favors from the corridors of political power. As a 13-year-old-boy he came to earn money in Moscow and was taken in by an aristocratic family. Now the aristocratic class no longer exists. The aristocrat, a major engineer, made him part of the family when he noticed that the boy was very sensitive and loved to draw. He sat him down to draw and he drew for six hours. And then he was sat down at the table with the grownups, to receive, so to speak his prize- lunch. But he didn't know where to put his hands, how to behave himself, because he had gone from one level of society to another. So he learnt aristocratic ways. Vladimir Chaplin was an important engineer. He noted papa's talent and enrolled a teacher to prepare him for the art and architecture school. And Papa drew diametrical forms for two years in order to get into the school. It was a Moscow school where the most talented were enrolled in the painting department. Papa got in. He constantly sketched geometric figures on paper- spheres, cones etc and he did this with great intensity, using perspective so these bodies came out from the paper at angles and disappeared into corners. At the age of 16, as one of 11 chosen from 270 competitors, he began to study classical drawing. He studied painting for four years and in the second year he met Mama and married in 1912. In 1913 my sister





**VIKTOR MELNIKOV LIVED IN HIS FATHER'S HOUSE-STUDIO HIS ENTIRE LIFE, MAINTAINING IT AS A MUSEUM UNTIL HIS DEATH LAST FEBRUARY.**

appeared and 1914 when he finished in the painting department, I appeared... Naturally Chaplin was concerned that the family lived comfortably and he made papa give his word that he would become an architect. He had received brilliant marks in the painting department and passed into the architecture department with no difficulty. When he became an architect he understood that from art, sculpture and architecture, architecture is the most important of the arts. It is not hidden on walls but is drawn in an expanse, in the open air... in the world. All this is written in his diary.

*ICON: How was it that until 1933 such an individualist and religious man, creating such progressive buildings, was permitted to work?*

VM: During revolutionary times, papa, a Russian Orthodox, managed to provide the confirmation that the revolution was looking for—art is, after all, a sort of confirmation and he won all the contests. But all the same, people would have criticized him if he hadn't built Lenin's sarcophagus. Lenin died and Schusev built a structure, a mausoleum and a competition was held for the sarcophagus. Papa made several variations and one of them he created—as he was a Russian Orthodox, so chose to see Lenin as sleeping beauty in the crystal coffin. Lenin's head and feet were outside the central crystal body of the sarcophagus, which made him look very big. When the war started the sarcophagus was evacuated and it was never returned. Nevertheless, Lenin was in his sarcophagus 22 years, so they didn't touch papa. Also, at a certain moment, when Lenin died, he was winning all the competitions. The first competition he won, for 'workers' houses,' he gave all the workers units their own entrances, so that each person didn't lose his individuality. He considered individuality to be the main source of purity. He built 26 buildings in the first nine years of his career.

community centers that were to serve as gatheriplaces. These are masterpieces of the avant garde have suffered from the economic upheavals in Russia since the fall of Communism.

In the nineties many factories were finding it impossible to survive the new economic climate. The Kauchuk factory (1927–1929) was forced to sublet its workers' club built by Konstantin Melnikov. Today, an expensive Chinese restaurant with a garish entrance has destroyed part of the façade and interior. Thick metal glazing bars have replaced the original wooden glazing bars, which were slender in simulation of metal, a material hard to obtain at the time. Original glazing has also been replaced with mirror glass which detracts from its appearance.. Original detail is only to be found on the top floor of the theater, where visitors never venture. Here are traces of original banisters, wooden flooring, and paint color. Elsewhere, modern floor tiles and metal banisters prevail. According to the law, these changes are illegal but widespread ignorance of the importance of authentic restoration work as well as a lack of personal commitment among employees of state preservation institutions means the law often goes unobserved.

The Moscow Planetarium (1928–1929), the work of M.O. Barsch and M.I. Siniavskii, has suffered a different fate having been all but destroyed by insensitive improvements. When built it was a potent symbol of the scientific advancement of the Soviet state. The dome is a lightweight steel frame and until recently it boasted external stairs of Corbusian simplicity and geometry. Recently the external staircase was destroyed during a renovation, when the dome was lifted 16 centimeters.

Other buildings of the period are facing the wrecking ball. Parts of the experimental Constructivist complex, Hostels of the Red Professor Institute (1929–1932) by D.P. Osipov and A.M. Rukhlyadev, are slated for demolition. These seven elegant buildings were constructed to house military teachers in training. They are in a desirable part of south Moscow and a large Moscow construction company has its eye on the spot. Osipov is a well-known Moscow architect of the period and the complex was under consideration for listing until early 2005. With administrative efforts to protect the site now in abeyance, the future of this complex is highly uncertain.

The next few years will be critical for Moscow's Modernist legacy. The authorities and community leaders need to understand that Soviet-era buildings have an important place in Russian history. Decisions over the future of Melnikov's House-Studio must be taken at the highest levels and in consultation with local and international experts. Heritage protection campaigns need to better promote Russia's Modernist among the population in general. Criteria for listing and conservation intervention of these non-traditional architectural forms must be developed, disseminated and adhered to. Fortunately, the champions of this cause in Russia are many, and range from professors of architectural history to cutting edge young architects and designers. Where Moscow treads, Russia follows, and many wonderful Modernist buildings in other Russian cities are also receiving rough treatment. It is important to set a precedent with a high quality restoration of the Melnikov House and Narkomfin in order to show how relevant, inspirational, and elegant these buildings still are. Those who have not yet visited Moscow to see her architectural wonders are advised to do so before any more buildings perish. ■