

# UTOPIAN DREAMS

## MOISEI GINZBURG'S NARKOMFIN DOM KOMMUNA

**B**ehind the Narkomfin Dom Kommuna's austere bands of double-height windows unfolds a six-story blueprint for communal living that is as ingenious as it is humane. Built between 1928 and 1930 by a team of architects and engineers led by Moisei Ginzburg, a member of the post-revolutionary Union of Contemporary Architects, the building, erected to house employees of the Ministry of Finance, consists not only of private quarters with built-in furniture but communal facilities—an open terrace on the second floor, and a garden and solarium atop the roof. A four-story annex housed a fitness center, kitchen, public restaurant, library, recreation room, and a nursery. Close by, a two story provided laundry and repair services. These facilities made the building a successful house-commune intended to dissolve social barriers though the division of household chores between inhabitants while preserving privacy. With its innovative approach to living, the structure was seen as an important step in the transformation of Soviet society for revolutionary housing types that were to be adopted by the entire Russian Republic.

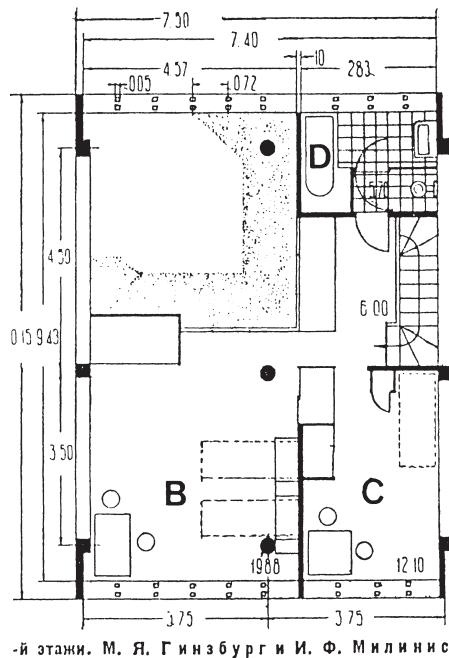
A Constructivist masterpiece, the Narkomfin building realized an important goal of European Modernist architecture, that of achieving the most minimal and rational support of modern life, the *existenz minimum*, and in the process fomenting social reform through architecture. Nowhere is this more evident than in the building's F-units with their innovative Frankfurt style kitchens, which influenced Le Corbusier's design for his iconic *Unité d'Habitation* in Marseilles.

Early drawings of the Narkomfin Dom Kommuna show it as a fragment of the idealized linear cities of avant-garde planners. Like a traditional romantic folly, which looked back toward Arcadia, the building was intended as a Communist utopia where, in the words of Ginzburg himself, "the peasant can listen to the songs of larks" and where "the combines of habitation, dense and compact, permit the inhabitants to enjoy gardens, expanses of greenery and the collective spaces of sport and relaxation."

The park in which the Narkomfin Dom Kommuna was placed was an attempt in miniature to realize the Constructivists' utopian vision of urban landscape that blurred the divisions between city and countryside. In developing the site, Ginzburg scrupulously recorded all the pre-existing trees so that he could insert his buildings with surgical precision while the columns upon which the building was raised would be painted to echo the black tree trunks of the old neoclassical park. Ginzburg's site plan of 1929 shows straight driveways leading up to the elevated forms of the complex at acute angles, highlighting its perspective, while behind the main building, curving paths are drawn with benches, which recall the earlier neoclassical pleasure park.

Despite its extraordinary impact on the development of twentieth-century avant-garde thought in architecture, Ginzburg's Utopia, was not to last. Following Stalin's rise to power in the late 1920s, rapid changes in Soviet society began to leave their mark on the site. Where Ginzburg had envisioned a plaza, an asphalted road was laid that went right up to the building without the exciting original diagonal per-

**OPPOSITE:** THE NARKOMFIN DOM KOMMUNA SHORTLY AFTER ITS COMPLETION IN 1930. A PLAN FOR THE BUILDING'S "K-UNITS," RIGHT. TODAY, THE BUILDING, BELOW, LANGUISHES IN A STATE OF NEGLECT AND DISREPAIR.



spectives. The architect's Constructivist landscaping was replaced with new planting—formal and geometric in keeping with Stalinist sensibilities. The meandering Arcadian paths and dynamic approaches by car fell by the wayside. Following Stalin's dissolution of the Ministry of Finance in the 1930s, administration of the Narkomfin Dom Kommuna was transferred to the Council of Peoples Commissars. Many of the inhabitants of the complex were arrested and imprisoned. At one point the records for the occupants of the Narkomfin Dom Kommuna surged with large numbers of women living for short periods of time—evidently the fleeing wives of arrested bureaucrats from there and other locations devastated by the purges. As families were being broken apart, so too were the apartments and spaces of the Narkomfin Dom Kommuna.

The rows of columns upon which the building was raised were filled in to create apartments for a swelling Moscow population. As elsewhere, many of the original apartments were subdivided into communal apartments or *kommunalki*. Where only a minimal dwelling for one family was envisioned, three would now be quartered. The bridge connecting the apartments to the communal dining facility was converted into a dormitory, while the dining facility itself was gradually turned over to other uses such as a print shop by the Council of People's Commissariats and later into offices for the local fire brigade.

Surprisingly the laundry facility remained in full operation well into the 1950s. In the early 1960s the apartment house itself was handed over to the local housing administration along with the laundry facility, while the communal block stayed with the Soviet of Ministries. At that time, large numbers of homeless people began squatting in the building, occupying leftover spaces in corridors and the dark recesses

of its basement. In the decades that followed, during the tenures of Khrushchev and Brezhnev, several attempts were made to return the building to its inhabitants so that they could reinstate its social program with sporting and communal dining facilities, all of which failed, leaving the building and its tenants to fall into further decline. The construction of the neighboring United States Embassy in 1981 further damaged the site. Construction vehicles destroyed the last remnants of the old park. Families moved from the decaying structure so that at the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union only half the units were occupied, the rest were emptied and left in decaying squalor.

Under current law it would be possible for the inhabitants to privatize the building and maintain it themselves. But there are too few of them to do so given the prohibitive costs of simply renovating the structure, let alone restoring the high conservation standards it deserves. Numerous proposals have been made to restore the structure yet, at present, the fate of this languishing masterpiece of twentieth century architecture is extremely precarious, despite its having been on the WMF's list of 100 Most Endangered Sites twice. ■