

# PREPARING PITFALL FOR MELNIKOV'S HOUSE

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**Коммерсантъ**<sup>®</sup>

Viktor Melnikov, son of the great Russian architect Konstantin Melnikov, invited journalists to his house in Krivoarbatsky Lane and read out his last will and testament. He bequeathed the house built by Konstantin Melnikov, the entire collection of his works as well as the entire collection of his own works to the state. The house, in the shape of two cylinders, with rhomboid windows was built in 1927. Now it is classed as a golden treasure of the world architectural heritage. Now, that world-renown architectural monument, Konstantin Melnikov's House in Moscow, is in danger again. A shopping mall is being built next to it. GREGORY REVZIN comments.

On Arbat Street they have demolished Building 39, the neighboring Building 41 is on its last legs, just one tenant remains there, Souvenirs shop, and its eviction is a matter of just few days. Both buildings have been architectural monuments of the 19th century, both of them are being razed illegally, but somehow it is an awkward conversation subject. Both buildings face Arbat Street, and in their common inner courtyard there stands the famous house of Konstantin Melnikov, the great Russian architect (1890-1974), which faces Krivoarbatsky Lane.

This unimaginable futuristic structure consisting of two cylinders (built in 1927-1929) has been reported as demolished so often that it is inappropriate to repeat that – it is one of the most famous architectural monuments in Moscow, a masterpiece of Vanguard, which is included in every study on the history of the 20th century architecture. The last time we mentioned the house was a year ago when Senator Sergey Gordeyev acquired one-half of the building, prior to the time when a seven-meter foundation pit was dug next to it, and the building started sliding into the pit, prior to the time they began erecting a residential high-rise to the left of the monument (thus, the idea of the Melnikov's Museum next to the House was buried) and cracks appeared in the monument.

This author also saw a next stage in the building destruction in its purchase by the Senator. As it turns out, he was mistaken, the Senator proved to be a supporter of the Vanguard architecture in general and Melnikov's House in particular, acting in that case as a rare species in Russia: a collector of architecture. But the experience shows that even presence of the Russian Federation Senator as the owner guarantees nothing.

I will just list the terms for the new construction. The plot in Arbat street has been purchased by Trust-Oil Company. It is not a fly-by-night but quite a real, reputable company specializing in the commercial development. On the site of numbers 39 and 41 Arbat Street it plans to build a shopping mall with four subbasements (the foundation level is 15 meters below ground, the shopping floor area is about 1,800 square meters). Six above-ground stories will be residential, as high as the



apartment block designed by architect Leonid Polyakov, which is being built next to it and will be the tallest in this part of the Arbat area.

Arbat Street, as everyone knows, is a pedestrian mall, and a shopping mall requires supplies. With such area of the trading floor it requires about 15 trucks per day. All of them will travel along Krivoarbatsky Lane where Melnikov's House stands. And they will be only able to reach the shopping mall via the arch in the building next to Melnikov's House, in other words, just five meters away from it. Melnikov's House has some wooden structures and even now when a truck passes it, the building shudders (now the truck traffic in that part of the city requires special permits).

The last time the house slid was when a seven-meter foundation pit was dug nearby, but now they are digging a fifteen-meter pit. The soils survey ordered this year by Sergey Gordeyev shows that there are karst caves in the area, so the possibility of everything starting to float is quite high.

The one thing to add is, probably, that the new facility is being built pursuant to a 2002 Moscow City Government Resolution that expired in December 2006; it was at that very moment that number 39 in Arbat Street was demolished. Building 37 Arbat Street is an estate dating back to the 19th century, an architectural monument whose protection zone includes the new construction site. It is naturally also included in the protection zone for Melnikov's House. In other words, according to the heritage protection laws, no construction is possible there. But in Arbat Street they have started building the new shopping mall in the area where it is banned pursuant to the laws on monument protection, on the soils which cannot sustain the loads, in the conditions when no transport service for the mall is feasible – and all this is done under the expired Moscow City Government Resolution. How can all this happen, I wonder?

Most likely, there is not a single official body left in Moscow where they fail to know what Melnikov's house is all about. Not just that it is a monument but that it is a trouble spot and it is better not to get involved in this. But our people are devil-may-care – the strategy is not about avoiding dangerous spots but about leading somebody else to such a dangerous spot without exposing oneself. The Moscow City Government has handed Buildings 39 and 41 over to the Vakhtangov Theater in order to build its minor stage there. This is a routine practice for us. First, the Mayor presents the site to the theater for a new development, and then this gift is specified in the sense of using that cultural institution as a battering-ram in some troublesome spot. So that it fights, so that it turns out that either the architectural monument perishes or the theater is left without its stage. When the cultural community gets struck dumb by the dilemma, it will be the time to involve a developer to build something in addition to the stage. That can be sold off profitably.

But the Vakhtangov Theater proved to be cunning and refused to play along: it rapidly, in the same year 2002, swapped its plot for another one (Buildings 26 and 28 Arbat Street), and the plot got switched to Trust-Oil. For them everything looked logical. Here was Arbat Street



with ground floors occupied entirely by retail outlets, their direct specialization. Here was the Moscow City Government directive banning placement of any residential premises on ground floors. So, everything pointed to a shopping mall with apartments above in Arbat Street – a first-rate piece of real estate.

Later it turned out that the mall could be neither built nor serviced. On the one hand, there is a plot where no construction is feasible for geological and protection reasons, a shopping mall that cannot be approached, and also the Russian Federation Senator supporting the architectural vanguard as a neighbor. On the other hand, there are people who have invested in the land purchase and in sustaining the process and also, most likely, secondary owners who have purchased the empty space above the site where nothing can be built. This goes on for four years until the Moscow City Government Resolution expires. And then, willy-nilly, they start the construction work, since construction is such a process during which many controversies could be lost after all.

It is boring to accuse the powers that be of corruption. Here it is not corruption, it is something more interesting. The authorities emerge not as some super-corrupted monster but as a group of centers awkwardly competing with one another. No construction is possible for protection reasons? Fine, the Moscow City Committee for Protecting Cultural Heritage gets involved. Has the problem been solved? Fine, now geologists will have their say. Have the geologists permitted it? Fine, swell, now we involve the Commerce Department, though flagrant breaches of all rules of commerce are evident. Has the Moscow City Government Resolution expired? It's just wonderful, we'll start working on issuing a new one at once.

And nobody could be found to blame in that process. This is a beautiful environment for the somewhat specialized business. But, unfortunately, it is impossible to preserve the architectural monument in that environment. Nobody conspires to demolish Melnikov's House, but everyone wants to make some money. And the fact that the price for such earnings is the monument destruction, well, it's just an acceptable damage.

Andrei Tikhonov: an eyesore!

ANDREI TIKHONOV, Trust-Oil General Director, comments on the situation to ANTON PAVLOV, Kommersant reporter.

– We know quite well the situation with Melnikov's House but somehow everything happening is seen through the prism of a possible harm to that building. Still, the architectural monument is outside our construction site area, so there is no threat from the new construction for its image and appearance. And after all, I fail to understand why a house which is an eyesore still stands in the Old Arbat among modern and renovated buildings! It would be reasonable to shift Melnikov's House out of the city center and arrange it so that no constant talk about the need to restore it continues. One should not forget that with preserving all architectural monuments we would have today been living in Moscow built of wood. ■

