

SOVIET VANGUARD UNDER PROTECTION

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List of Moscow Architectural Monuments Can Expand Greatly Soon

“Architecture is also a chronicle of the world: it still speaks out when all songs and legends fall silent, and when already nothing else points to the perished people.” These exalted words were written by Nikolai Gogol just some 150 years ago and for about one hundred of them ungrateful ancestors have been working double tides trying to negate the classical writer. The list of our lost cultural heritage is shocking and it continues to grow – there a masterpiece of wooden architecture gets burned down, here a monument is demolished as hindering the triumphal march of skyscrapers, or it collapses itself just due to neglect and complete desolation. So from the chronicle mentioned by Nikolai Gogol not just individual pages disappear, but entire chapters get torn out root and branch. But here they decided to save another chapter. This chapter is entitled “Soviet Constructivism of the 1920’s – 1930’s” and, surely, it contains glorious pages in the history of the domestic architecture.

The 20’s – 30’s of the previous century can be rightly seen as a passionate era of the national architecture accompanied by the urban construction boom – a whole lot of major industrial cities emerged in the country and those existing earlier got changed. “All flowers bloomed” in architecture – from impressive achievements of constructivists up to the traditional classicism and modernism with architects who redesigned them filling their projects with new ideological symbols. The architecture of the 1920’s – 1930’s means the world renowned names of the Vesnin brothers, Ivan Zholtovsky, Alexei Shchusev. The latter, by the way, supervised the creation of the first overall plan for the “New Moscow” (1918 - 1923).

The 1920’s – 1930’s have left their impressive imprint on the architectural appearance of the capital, and, in spite of their relatively short existence, the buildings have long needed protection and preservation themselves; it would suffice to recall the gloomy lot of the works by Melnikov.

Speaking in general terms, the problem of preserving the 20th century heritage and of practically utilizing or adapting it is a cause of concern not only for us.

It was the problem discussed at the recent international seminar on The 20th Century Heritage – Monument Protection and Preservation in Berlin. German specialists have accumulated an extensive experience of restoring and properly utilizing buildings constructed in the first half of the 20th century. “Development in Germany is very popular. Specialists acquire industrial architectural works, restore them and then rent them out for \$US300 million annually, while in many other countries such buildings are considered no longer profitable and it seem to be much easier to raze them,” says Natalia Loginova, spokesper-



son for the Moscow City Committee for Protecting Cultural Heritage. In addition, in Germany they are now actively preparing documents for UNESCO: six workers' settlements built in the 1920's and 1930's should be put under protection.

While the Germans are proud of their worker's settlements constructed in the first half of the 20th century, we are equally proud of the Soviet Vanguard. The special exhibition in Berlin demonstrated main trends of the early Soviet architecture: urban development ideas, the Soviet experiment – housing communes and clubs, architectural vertical lines of Moscow, and, of course, the prewar stations of the Moscow subway. The exhibition objective was to “vividly demonstrate to the seminar participants and the Berlin public the historic heritage of Moscow and successes in restoring and reconstructing architectural monuments of the Soviet period.” But not everything by far has the status of architectural monuments, including the famous 1920's-1930's buildings. It is the situation that the Moscow City Committee for Protecting Cultural Heritage intends to rectify soon.

At recent expert commission meetings at the Moscow City Committee for Protecting Cultural Heritage several sites were considered for putting them under the government protection. Applications had been made by Russian Avantgarde Foundation. The commission decided to include into the list of identified cultural heritage properties the following sites: Apartment block for workers of the Kursk Railroad with shopping and administrative premises designed by B. Shatnev (1928, 27/1 Zemlyanoi Val St.), School building designed by Peter Antipov (the early 1930's, 5 Khavskaya St.), Student hostel for the Red Professors' Institute designed by D. Ossipov and Alexei Rukhlyadev (1929-1932, 51 Bolshaya Pirogovskaya St.), Textile Workers' Club by Leonid Vesnin (1927-28, 24 Sel'skokhozyaistvennaya St.), Hostel blocks for the Markhlevsky Communist University of Western Ethnic Minorities by Gregory Dankman (1929-1931, 6, 8, 10 Petroverigsky Lane), Construction Exhibition ensemble by S. Lyashchenko (1932-34, 3a 1st Frunzenskaya St.), Lower Presnya apartment blocks design and development by Peter Antipov, V. Bibikov and other architects (the 1920's – 1930's).

“Overall, all those architects were the top grade masters whose ideas as early as in the 1920's-1930's greatly impressed European experts. In addition, putting the architectural sites of the 1920's – 1930's under protection on such a mass scale is a demonstration of the fact that the moment of awareness and of reevaluation has arrived for that period in the history of architecture,” the Moscow City Committee for Protecting Cultural Heritage people say.

“Reevaluation of the period” can mean some tenancy problems for the organizations that can turn into tenants of architectural monuments from tenants of simply well-known buildings. It entails quite a different level of responsibility and care. Pursuant to Article 48 of the Federal law No. 73-FZ “On Cultural Heritage Properties (Monuments of History and Culture) of the Russian Federation Peoples”, “the owner of a cultural heritage property has to bear maintenance costs for the cultural heritage property owned by it, which is included in the register



or is identified as a cultural heritage property, in compliance with the requirements of this Federal law, unless otherwise provided for in a contract between the owner and the tenant of such cultural heritage property.” It is quite possible that such a burden will prove to be too heavy for many organizations. “Nobody is going to evict anyone. But, should a decision be made on granting the architectural monument status to such buildings, their owners or tenants will have to conclude a contract with us according to which they will be obligated to properly maintain the building. This measure is provided for not only by No. 73-FZ but by Moscow laws Nos. 40 and 26 as well. If the owners or tenants start protesting or fail to honor their obligations under the contract, we cancel it. And such cancelation is absolutely lawful,” Natalia Loginova says. 

