

# VANGUARD TO REMEMBER

November 16, 2007

## Коммерсантъ Weekend

*Melnikov's House has a chance to become a real museum, Gregory Revzin, a member of Committee of Trustees for establishing the Museum, hopes.*

Two years ago, Sergey Gordeyev, Senator from the Perm Territory, acquired one-half of Architect Konstantin Melnikov's House. It is an architectural monument; the house is the utopia of Russian vanguard school, looking like a Terrestrial outpost on Mars. More likely, Terrestrial outposts on Mars look like that House, since all of them are patterned after it.

When the senator bought one-half of the House many people, me included, suspected something terrible: that he would soon acquire the second half, then raze the House and build something highly profitable instead. But the Senator began acting in quite an opposite manner, he established Russian Avantgarde Foundation (which since then has managed to publish 15 books on Russian vanguard, repair the Russian pavilion at the Venice Biennale, bring Alvaro Siza's exhibition to Russia, and organize an exhibition of Russian architectural vanguard in the New York Museum of Modern Art), transferred his half of the House to the Foundation, and acquired another masterpiece by Melnikov – Burevestnik Club. And he started making a museum out of Melnikov's House. For some time the cultural community was still in doubt fearing that it was some smokescreen for his actual evil thoughts, but such doubts just could not linger long.

Everything started moving towards the Museum, but the road proved to be far from smooth. The cultural community has always been saying that the museum should be established. As early as in Konstantin Melnikov's lifetime, then in the 1990's when his son Viktor Melnikov, artist, resided there, later when Viktor Melnikov died bequeathing his half of the House to the state (the other half had belonged to his sister, then to her son Alexei Ilganayev and it was the half bought by the Senator) for the Museum to be organized there. But it never materialized. Granddaughters of the great architect went to courts (and are still doing it) against each other trying to determine who was to execute their father's will on transferring their property to the state. And the state could not get its inheritance, since the condition for the House title was establishment of the Museum, but, pursuant to our rules, it is quite impossible to organize the House Museum without first getting the title to the House itself. It seemed that such cozy situation would prevail forever. The cultural community would forever demand the museum, the granddaughters would be forever at law with each other, the state would forever rustle instructions and everybody would blame everyone foaming at the mouth.

Actually, this is what always happens with legacies of all great vanguard masters. There is always the legacy, often – litigating heirs, al-



ways – vague state plans and accusations from the cultural public. And so, there is not a single museum yet in existence of great Russian vanguard figures – neither of Malevich, nor of Kandinsky, Tatlin, the Vesnin brothers, Ginzburg, not a single one. Still, the Senator, not well-versed in such subtleties of our cultural customs, denounced all this as just fussing around and started making the Museum right away. With the idea that when it is completed, the legal problems will be solved somehow. Some unexpectedness, close to a scandal, has emerged with such an approach. Because, how can it be – just making the Museum? Just going and making it?

A museum means, first of all, visitors, second, some exposition, third, staffers, fourth, financing. Melnikov's House is small; just three hundred square meters in area, not more than five persons have ever lived in it. While visitors entail guided tours, a lot of people. There will be dirty footmarks after them. And, after all, the floors there are experimental, they sag even now and if a group of some thirty people is brought there, suppose they collapse. A museum means fire safety and emergency exits, among other things; nothing like those exist there. In order to bring visitors in the House should be restructured, but it is a monument by status. Now, as for the exposition. What should be shown there? In fact, in Melnikov's House the main thing on display has always been the building itself, people were living there, but we seemed to act as if ignoring them, just looking at the House as it was. But now nobody would live there, it would be the Museum. Some pictures, Melnikov's designs are required. Where can they be obtained, which of them should hang on the walls? Again, Melnikov's son Viktor was an artist, all his works were there in the house, standing around and hanging on the walls, and in his will he specified that it should be the museum of the Melnikovs, father and son. How about that? Finally, as concerns staffers. Shouldn't they be located somewhere? An office is needed, rooms for top managers, storerooms. There are just three hundred square meters there, should all that also be housed in it? A stalemate, an absolute stalemate...

When I was telling all this to Senator Gordeyev, I thought it was a real revelation, that no one was aware of that. But in the process it became clear that a lot of cultural figures had already approached him with that song and dance and that I was about the fiftieth in that line. It was a pity that I failed to distinguish myself, but the point at issue was still the same. Anyhow it looked like no museum could be made there, just for the lack of room.

But Russian Avantgarde Foundation acquired one apartment on the first floor of the building next to Melnikov's House, with the windows facing the garden around the House. The office, ticket-selling facility, storerooms can be located there now. In other words, the space has been found. Against an apartment in Arbat area all arguments wane somehow.

Russian Avantgarde Foundation has formed the Committee of Trustees for Establishing Melnikov's House Museum which includes star architects (Zaha Hadid, Rem Koolhaas), historians of architecture (John Stubbs, Vice-president of the World Monument Foundation; Jean Louis



Cohen, famous historian and theoretician of architecture from France), artists (Ilya and Emilia Kabakov), journalists (Clementine Cecil, who, by the way, founded Moscow Architecture Preservation Society), Directors of Alvar Aalto's and John Soane's museums, also important people from Russia – David Sarkisyan, Director, Moscow Architecture Museum, Dmitry Shvidkovsky, Chancellor, Moscow Architecture Institute, Pavel Khoroshilov, Deputy Head of the Mass Communications, Culture and Education Department at the Russian Federation Government Staff, and Ekaterina Karinskaya, Mr. Melnikov's granddaughter. The first Committee meeting was held in October in London, in John Soane's Museum.

John Soane's Museum is one of the finest museums in the world that I have ever seen. It resembles a Rubik's cube but with, instead of colorful squares, antique sculptures, architectural elements, paintings, engravings, statues, everything is packed full, and while you are walking around it seems that somebody is rotating the cube itself – you have left a room, want to come back, but something quite different is there already, with other antiques, new lighting, the room with diverse dimensions. How they do that is quite another story, but believe me, it is a fantastic place.

So, all that distinguished people gathered in Sir John's breakfast room and began discussions. Russian Avantgarde Foundation had entrusted the Museum draft concept to the British Casson Mann Bureau, and the bureau was making its report. It was an amazing report.

“How to make a museum out of Melnikov's House? Should it be a museum in the House or a museum of the House with the House being an exhibit in the Museum? What to do with visitors? Can guided tours be allowed? What to do with safety and security overall and fire safety, in particular? How should the floors be strengthened? How should the House be restored? What kind of exposition should be there? Should it be the museum of everyday living as the House exists today, or should the works be exhibited there? If so, which ones? What to do with Viktor Melnikov's paintings? Where should offices, rooms for top managers, storerooms be located, where should books be sold?”

All the questions I wanted answered the Bureau itself asked at the meeting, not replying to them. There were no answers at all. As I understood, it was a special, British style of work.

Well, they asked their questions, the Committee members answered them long and in different ways, and finally everyone agreed that there were many issues before the Committee and they should meet again and discuss them. Should this have happened here, in Russia, I would have said that no progress was attained and nobody decided on anything. But, first, all the Committee members had quite an opposite view and the meeting terminated in a dinner with everybody being in a real triumphal mood due to the work well done. And, second, that Casson Mann did establish really fine Winston Churchill's Museum, and, in addition to that organized the Camouflage - history of the 20th century military uniforms - exhibition at Imperial War Museum in London, an exhibition of Chinese photos and videos, Time Museum in Greenwich



and a dozen of other projects; it should be said that they are really fine exhibition designers who as a result do everything beautifully.

So, there is just one thing I can say. Melnikov's House Museum will, most likely, emerge. And it will be the museum the likes of which we have never had – the first personal museum of a Russian vanguard master organized with the best modern world museum design. But how it will look, how it will work, nobody knows yet. Or, maybe, somebody knows but is not telling for the time being. ■

