

DOING GOOD FOR RUSSIAN VANGUARD

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РОССИЙСКАЯ
ГАЗЕТА

One year ago Sergey E. Gordeyev, a Federation Council member representing the Administration of the Ust-Ordynsky Buryat Autonomous District, acquired one-half of Melnikov House in order to establish a museum there. The House is an architectural masterpiece dating back to the 1920's. It was as amazing to learn about this as it would be to hear about selling a tower in the Kremlin.

But everything is not that simple. Another Constructivist masterpiece – the Narcomfin building – has been falling into decay for many years. The public is indignant, but they still cannot find any money to care for that building, blackened with time. So, this rotten tooth still sticks out in-between the American Embassy and the Novinsky Arcade.

The same fate would surely be in store for Melnikov's House, but for Senator Gordeyev investing his own funds in it. He has established the precedent: it has turned out that Constructivism is utterly fashionable, that it is a collector's target, it is worth money. And should, following Melnikov's House, our other Constructivist buildings, relatively few in numbers, find their guardians, it would be a miracle.

A new generation of managers has entered the culture. It is hardened in the business environment, suffers no financial problems, uses the managerial approach and at the same time is keenly aware of its Kultur-trager mission. It seems likely to be good news. The Russian Gazette reporter spoke with Sergey Gordeyev:

RG: Mr. Gordeyev, can you tell us about yourself, what are your family origins, when have you got involved with architecture?

Gordeyev: I come from a rank-and-file Moscow family, I had attended a regular secondary school in the city South-West, and taken interest in photography, poetry, theater. But my interest in architecture emerged much later. It was linked with my intense emotional impression with the gothic architecture. I was carried away by it, started collecting books about it, and specially visited most famous cathedrals. At some moment the 20th century classics intruded in the area of my architectural interests – Le Corbusier and Frank Lloyd Wright. From them it was just a short step to the Russian Constructivism. In our history Melnikov is on par with Wright by the greatness of his talent and his approach versatility. Thus, I have found the key figure which I have decided to deal with closely.

RG: What does “deal with” mean? Reading books? I myself have read them some time ago. I cannot say that it was very captivating pursuit...

Gordeyev: Is that so? Those that I have found were quite captivating. But there are only a few books about Melnikov: those by Han-Magomedov, Strigalev, by Frederick Star, an American. Surely, I not only



read the books but looked at his works, communicated with his heirs. And I have got an idea to establish the Melnikov's House Museum. I got acquainted with the architect's son, Viktor Melnikov. It took me half a year to make sense of the numerous litigations among the heirs dragging on for 20 years. And in December 2005, at the request of one group of the heirs, I purchased one-half of the house and started work on realizing my idea concerning the House Museum.

RG: Still, the media reaction was noisy. They thought that you were interested in a centrally-located parcel of land. How have you weathered all this?

Gordeyev: I was amazed that reporters proved to be too sloppy to direct their questions to me personally. I had a feeling that they wanted a sensation, some hot facts. Later they were apologizing to me. No other variants for using the House, aside from establishing the House Museum, have ever been considered.

RG: What changed during 2006?

Gordeyev: Viktor Melnikov willed one-quarter of the House to the State under certain conditions. Some of them are quite controversial. For instance, he wanted the museum to be dedicated to both Melnikovs, the father and the son. I think that it is not quite fair as concerns architecture. It should be the museum of the house itself. A memorial one, including the architect's personal items, paintings, among them those by the architect's son, but only those being there in Konstantin Melnikov's lifetime. A museum not overloaded with any other content.

There are several similar houses in the world. In London, it is Soane's House, that of Sir John Soane, architect. It was turned into a museum as early as the 19th century. In America they have Taliesin Estate where Frank Lloyd Wright used to live, Rudolf Schindler's House Studio in Los Angeles.

The format for such museums already exists: if architects ever built houses for themselves, in many countries museums in the houses of those architects are established subsequently. For instance, Frank Lloyd Wright's House Museum. All the memorial furnishings have been fully preserved there, guided tours are conducted more for educational purposes, since the interested public, architects want to see the very house studio format.

Architects often say: 'Great buildings mean that there were great clients.' It is so, because a lot of compromises always emerge in the construction process.

Gradually everything everywhere is narrowed down. You remember, in the Irony of Fate... movie: a design gets its clearances and as a result faceless buildings appear. So, for an architect a good client is most important. And with an architect's own house, the client and the architect are one and the same, so architects' houses are something exceptional and unique. There is nobody to blame for anything: it is a pure expression of what the architect wants to attain.

Late last year I established the noncommercial Russian Avantgarde Foundation to advance preservation of the cultural heritage. Mikhail Piotrovsky, Hermitage Director, Thomas Krens, the Solomon Guggenheim Foundation Director, Academician Selim O. Han-Magomedov,



Lydia Iovleva, Tretyakov Gallery Deputy Director, and Evgenia Petrova, the Russian Museum Deputy Director, agreed to join its Board of Trustees. The Foundation objective is to advance preservation of the Russian architectural heritage, Melnikov's House included.

Now the Foundation is in the process of clearing the Museum concept with relatives, with the Culture and Mass Communications Ministry.

We work in a close cooperation with the Architecture Museum, with Konstantin Melnikov's heirs; discuss the matter with the Government. The Foundation had a survey of the soils and load-bearing structures of Melnikov's House carried out. There are alarming developments with them and all of them are caused by the construction sites nearby. Jointly with the traffic police we have restricted parking in front of the building.

RG: What other difficulties are there, in addition to the clearances?

Gordeyev: The building is fragile. If the Museum is to be organized there, capacities of the load-bearing structures should be calculated. For instance, 200 to 300 persons visit Soane's House daily. Melnikov's House had not been fit for such a flow of visitors from the very beginning. Its structure, quite possibly, will have to be strengthened. We need specialists in scientific preservation of modernist buildings. There are no such experts in Russia. Most likely, they will have to be invited from Britain or Germany, where they have some experience in implementing such projects.

We will also have to establish a proper managing structure. The most optimal option, in my opinion, is to hand over all the rights and titles for Melnikov's House to a special trust which can be organized, maybe with the government participation. But everything should be handed over to the State only when the project has been fully completed, the Museum is operating, its structure and program are clear. And the main thing is that it should be a museum of the modern European class. So it would be pleasant and comfortable for people to visit it.

RG: What is the Foundation doing, in addition to the restoration?

Gordeyev: We are collecting archives of the 20th century Russian architects. The Foundation is acquiring contest designs, working drawings as well as personal archives – correspondence, diaries. By now we have works by Ivan Leonidov, Melnikov, Alexei Shchusev, and Ivan Zholtovsky in our collection. The Foundation objective is to make that legacy available to young Russian architects, via Internet among other means, for it to become a part of educational programs.

We want those who study now to absorb this cultural layer, want their designs to be in harmony with the 1920's architecture – the period when the Soviet architecture was interesting and, without any doubt, the most advanced in the world.

The Foundation is also collecting the Soviet architectural periodicals of the 1920's and 1930's — Soviet Architecture and Modern Architecture, LEF, Ugo-Lef, Building USSR magazines, various yearbooks. Everything that it is possible to digitize we will place on Internet for free. Possibly, we will reprint something. And we will open a library in the future.



We also have a publishing program. It is aimed at publishing books on the history of the Soviet Vanguard architecture. Three of the planned books have already been published, including a reprint of Selim Han-Magomedov's monograph on Melnikov.

The Foundation is also involved in the project of the Federal Agency for Culture and Cinema on preparing the Russian pavilion in Venice for the next Biennale of contemporary art.

RG: You plan many of your projects for the Web. It is the Internet 2 phenomenon, fashionable right now, where there is a general access to everything, everything is free of charge. Are you going to gain any profits from you activities?

Gordeyev: No, we are not. I see all this from the point of view of benefits for the State. The experience of the 1990's has shown that the correct realization of cultural projects can be a very advantageous state business.

Everything started with the Guggenheim Museum in the Basque capital of Bilbao. A restless Spanish province, a provincial town – nothing could attract tourists and investors there. They spent about \$US100 million on the museum construction. It paid for itself in three years thanks to tax receipts.

Bilbao has become a Mecca for tourists, annually one million visitors come there, and 90 per cent of them specially travel from abroad for this. So, if you manage art properly, you can improve your country's image and increase its investment appeal.

In January 2007 I was at a museum facility presentation in Abu Dhabi. They will build four museums on the Saadiyat Island (the Island of Happiness in Arabic) as well as a concert hall being designed by Zakha Khadid and pavilions for a Biennale of contemporary art.

The museum buildings are being designed by stars of architecture: Jean Nouvel, Tadao Ando, and Frank Gehry. The project budget is \$US1.5 billion. Louvre will "operate" the Classic Art Museum, for which a 20-year agreement has already been signed. Louvre will represent seven French museums in Abu Dhabi.

RG: In Russia, it is not feasible to find one and a half billion for a museum. What is the way out?

Gordeyev: One of these days our Foundation is moving to Burevestnik Club on the 3rd Rybinskaya Street in Sokolniki. The Club was built by Konstantin Melnikov in 1930. Recently it has been renovated, but not quite properly as concerns the original design. Still, the building is in good condition and I think that we will gradually remake it closer to the original Melnikov's design, try to establish the ambience there envisioned by Melnikov.

We want to turn Burevestnik into a venue for the professional community and for people interested in the Russian architectural Vanguard. There will be a gallery space there as well as a lecture hall, library, café. It will be a place where the enthusiastic public will be able to come to for socializing. Possibly, we will open a permanent exhibition platform there jointly with the Architecture Museum or the Guggenheim Museum or the MAK – Austrian Museum of Applied Art.



RG: After devoting so much time to the Russian Vanguard, you must have already “become related” with its heroes, those who had created it at the time. Which out of those legendary architects do you feel closer to you on a personal plane?

Gordeyev: It is Konstantin Melnikov. And not because we are establishing his museum right now. Everything Melnikov had done in his lifetime had been his personal opinion, his expression; he had his own view of everything. For instance, he was saying that Palladio was bad architecture, though in the Stalin epoch everyone worshipped Palladio’s work. I am eager for those who will some time come to the Melnikov’s House Museum for a tour to sense the charisma of the architectural genius, the full force of his individuality.

RG: Do you have a mission?

Gordeyev: It would be fine, should we, with my colleagues on the Federation Council and from Russian Avantgarde Foundation, be able to help in developing the contemporary Russian architecture so that in 10 or 20 years our architects could grow up to the international level and compete with Western masters as equals. So that they would be invited to do construction projects in foreign countries. 

