

FOR SOVIET-ERA ARCHITECTURE, A WHITE RUSSIAN KNIGHT EMERGES

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On most nights, the Russian Samovar, a dimly lighted restaurant at the edge of the theater district in Midtown Manhattan, is a gloomy blend of new Russian money and faded émigré glamour.

But recently its upstairs dining room was haunted by ghosts from the 1920's and '30's, the golden age of the Soviet avant-garde. The grandson of the Constructivist architect Moisei Ginzburg stood in a corner chatting with the daughter of Alexei Dushkin, who once designed subway stations for Stalin. A few steps away, the daughter of the Soviet planner Nikolai Milyutin sipped cranberry vodka with Barry Bergdoll, the Museum of Modern Art's top architecture curator.

They were all there for a symposium dinner related to "Lost Vanguard: Soviet Modernist Architecture, 1922-32," a show of recent photographs by Richard Pare at the Modern that conveys the fragile state of so many architectural monuments built in that heady era.

Yet the buzz in the room had less to do with Russia's architectural heritage than with a celebrity who had not yet walked through the door: Sergey Gordeyev, a 34-year-old Russian senator helped finance the show at the Modern.

Two years ago, Mr. Gordeyev bought a share of Melnikov's House (1927) in Moscow, setting off a panic in the city's small but tightly knit preservation community. With its cylindrical interlocking forms, a hypnotic blend of Modernist purity and Russian mysticism, the house is considered a landmark of Soviet architecture. Today, Melnikov's House seems destined to become a museum. And that is mostly, if not all, due to Mr. Gordeyev, who has emerged as a white-knight protector of Soviet architecture.

"I've already spent \$4 million on Melnikov's House," Gordeyev said. "I really think to do preservation in the proper way — government doesn't have the money for that. I like the situation in America, where preservation has the support of private institutions. This is the right model for Russia, where there are a lot of rich people."

Last year he also bought the Burevestnik Factory Workers Club, another revered building by Melnikov, in suburban Moscow. Mr. Gordeyev founded the Russian Avantgarde Foundation, whose mandate includes fostering innovative new architecture and publishing books on Russian architecture as well as protecting and restoring Soviet-era landmarks.

He recently bought the archives of the architects Ivan Leonidov and Alexei Shchusev, and he plans to make the material available to scholars. He has introduced legislation in the Russian Parliament that would require the removal of advertising billboards from the city's architectural landmarks. (The bill was recently approved by the upper chamber and is now in the lower chamber.)



With his fingers in so many pies, it can seem as though Mr. Gordeyev's hands hold the fate of one of the greatest legacies of 20th-century Modernism. And while the preservationists who once feared him now fervently praise him, they privately admit to some disquiet.

Asked how he had become interested in architecture, Mr. Gordeyev was slightly vague. After the borders with the West opened up in the early 1990's, he said, he spent two years drifting around Europe, where he said he fell in love with Gothic churches.

"It is when I first discovered architecture," he said. He did not elaborate further.

Questioned about his family background, he said he had grown up in Moscow, where his father was a weapons engineer and his mother a biochemist.

Mr. Gordeyev added that he was slightly uncomfortable with the amount of attention he had drawn for his preservationist activity. "The real start in preservation in Moscow was organizations like MAPS" — the Moscow Architecture Preservation Society, founded in 2004 — "foreign preservationists who came to Moscow, and people like Dushkina, who sounded the alarm," he said referring to Dushkin's daughter Irina. "They are volunteers, activists, who are not getting any money."

His preservationist activity so far seems dogged. After leaving New York, he passed through London, where he played host to a meeting of architectural historians to lay the groundwork for his Melnikov's House museum. And he recently approached Frank Gehry about designing something for the Russian city of Perm.

One could argue that in embracing the arts, Mr. Gordeyev echoes a long American tradition. Tycoons here have long sought a cultural patina for their newly acquired wealth. Yet it took two generations for, say, the Rockefellers to amass their money and transform it into something of cultural value.

Mr. Gordeyev is seeking to transform himself from brash capitalist to cultural philanthropist in little more than a decade. What is more, the pell-mell nature of development in Russia makes its architectural legacy particularly vulnerable. For this reason alone, his journey is worth watching.

"Why are Americans afraid of Russians?" he asked. "Because they are unclear of their intentions."

"These are good changes happening in Russia," he continued. "I am just a part of it. We all want this heritage to survive, to be accessible to everybody. We need to be part of the world to do this right." ■

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