

# VANGUARD LET ADRIFT

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Late at night on October 13 fire broke out in the building of the former print shop on 1st Samotechny Lane. According to the emergency services, the conflagration area exceeded 100 square meters, 18 fire units were dispatched to fight the blaze. On fire were the 4th floor and attic of the building whose design is attributed to El Lissitzky – the outstanding classic of the Russian Vanguard, artist, architect, designer, and art theoretician. But officially the structure is not classified as an architectural monument. The Moscow City Committee for Protecting Cultural Heritage (Moskomnasledie) has been considering for a year already the application of Russian Avantgarde Foundation for recognizing the print shop a newly identified cultural heritage property. The fate of the Lissitzky project has been let to drift freely.

## **“ON SAMOTEKA”**

There is no doubt about the authorship of Mr. Lissitzky. The son of the famous Constructivist, now living in Germany, has confirmed that it really was his father who had designed the print shop building. The design is dated 1928 and it was ordered by the Ogonek (Little Light) magazine, with the concept changing during the construction. It can be noted with a high degree of confidence that it is the only actual building designed by El Lissitzky who, like many his colleagues, mainly produced “architecture on paper.”

According to Maryana Evstratova, Chief Curator, Russian Avantgarde Cultural Heritage Preservation Foundation submitted its application in June 2007 for recognizing as newly identified cultural heritage properties two buildings on 1st Samotechny Lane (the name means freely running water and stems from several ponds with canals between that used to form a cascade, a part of the Neglinnaya River in the downtown Moscow). In addition to the print shop (17 1st Samotechny Lane), another Constructivist work is right next door, the apartment block built in 1935 for employees of the Zhurgaz (Magazines and Newspapers) Publishing Association. Its designer was Mikhail Barshch, architect, who built in 1927-29, jointly with Mikhail Sinyavsky, the Moscow Planetarium. In addition to its architectural merits the building has great memorial value. In his published memoirs Boris Efimov, famous Russian cartoonist, often mentioned “the house on Samoteka” where he had repeatedly visited his brother Mikhail Koltsov, a well-known journalist. The Koltsov’s fifth-floor apartment had seen such guests as writers Mikhail Bulgakov and Valentin Kataev, film director Sergey Eisenstein, artist and architect El Lissitzky.

In September 2007 Moskomnasledie Commission No. 216 made a positive decision: the print shop and the Zhurgaz apartment block next door were eligible to be classified as “newly identified cultural heritage properties.” The traditional conservation practice provides that should a building acquire the status of the newly identified property, it auto-



matically comes under the state protection. The next step was to be for Moskomnasledie to submit the document package on granting the regional status to the property for approval to the Moscow City Government.

But the documents on granting that status to the buildings in 1st Samotechny Lane never got signed. Another commission was appointed, since some additional data was required. The Moskomnasledie experts were trying to decide whether to list the print shop and the Zhurgaz apartment block as an ensemble or as separate monuments. At a meeting on August 21, 2008 the Moskomnasledie commission members recognized both buildings as newly identified cultural heritage properties and examples of the 1930's Russian Vanguard. As Russian Avantgarde Foundation representatives were told, the official minutes of the meeting were to be formalized and signed soon.

### **LAWS AND METHODS**

The fire in Samotechny Lane was bright and intense and nobody can say whether it was a spontaneous combustion or arson. Some onlookers noted that such flames “can only occur with kerosene.” But those were just impressions and idle talk. And as early as two years ago there were rumors that the local authorities were considering a new apartment block project to replace the print shop. Maybe it was this that has retarded consideration of El Lissitzky's drawings? Also, for some reason the house number for the print shop in the register of the cultural heritage properties applied for is given incorrectly – it is recorded there as 15A 1st Samotechny Lane, while in fact the number is 17.

But for the Zhurgaz block the threat is even more acute. Its tenants have been for almost a year countering attacks by ZAO Inteko Company that tries to pass pipes of a trunk heat-supply line right through the building foundations. Soon they are going to start construction of a tall elite building with underground parking on plot 17B. Still, according to Federal law No. 73 “On Cultural Heritage Properties of the Russian Federation Peoples”, even if a facility is only applied for and formally is not a cultural heritage property yet, special requirements are to be made for all design documents in any way relevant to such building and its conservation. So, any excavations under the foundations of such building become quite impossible.

Federal law No. 73, Article 36, Clause 2:

“Should properties with features of a cultural heritage property, as defined in Article 3 of this Federal law, be identified in the territory to be developed, sections on ensuring conservation of the identified properties until such properties are included in the register in the manner set by this Federal law shall be incorporated in specifications of land-management, earth-moving, construction, land-improvement, development and other works, while the validity of provisions of land-management, urban-planning and design documentation and urban-planning regulations for such territory shall be suspended until relevant changes are made.”

Had Moskomnasledie placed the print shop and the Zhurgaz block under the state protection, another law would have applied – Moscow



City law No. 40 “On special procedures for regulating urban planning activities in the historical territories of the City of Moscow and in the protected territories for cultural heritage properties in the City of Moscow.” It is clearly stated there that no new construction is allowed in the territory of a monument. It can be assumed that plot 17B acquired for new construction would intrude on the protected land belonging to the Zhurgaz block (house number 17A) and the print shop (house number 17). And that would mean that the developer should either make corrections in the design or stop the construction.

## **MONUMENTS OF CONSTRUCTIVISM**

The architecture of Constructivism was discredited in the minds of people living in the post-Soviet space by the monotonous sectional panel houses built in the 1950’s and 1960’s. The sad state of many Constructivist buildings is an example of the city’s neglect concerning its unique heritage. It was in the 1920’s and 1930’s that a vigorous architectural school was formed that brought the world-wide fame to Russia. And while the world cultural community compiles and expands the UNESCO lists and admires architects Leonidov, Melnikov and the Vesnin brothers, the surviving testimony to greatness of the Russian Vanguard is granted just the lowest status – properties of regional significance, in other words, those of a local urban importance only.

The entire world community worried about the fate of the Narkomfin building (Moisei Ginzburg, architect) and architect Konstantin Melnikov’s House that have been repeatedly included in the World Monuments Fund Watch List. But there has been some progress concerning those properties. The idea to establish a museum of Melnikov House which was his manifesto and open it to the public is close to fruition – the private Russian Avantgarde Foundation has been founded for advancing and financing it, among other things. A similar scheme has been used by Mian real estate company in order to restore the Narkomfin building and convert it into an apartment hotel designed by Alexei Ginzburg, the architect’s grandson.

Now urgent help is required for the work by El Lissitzky, one of the most brilliant figures of the Russian Vanguard. The print shop designed by him will remain unprotected until the minutes are signed and Moskomnasledie starts discharging its main duties – protecting and conserving the historical heritage in the City of Moscow. They have managed to save most of the print shop building from the fire, but its roof got destroyed. If it is not repaired soon, the coming winter and passing time will finish what the fire has failed to accomplish. ■

