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Mobilizing Support for Conserving 20th Century Architecture

The World Monuments Fund is a private not-for-profit organization based in New York that is devoted to saving examples of significant architectural heritage throughout the world. While WMF dates back to 1965, our involvement with conserving cultural heritage dating from the 20th century dates only to 1988, when the organization helped in the restoration of a number of post-Revolutionary wall murals in Mexico City by Diego Rivera, Jose Clemente Orozco and others after a devastating earthquake there.

The first call to WMF for assistance in conserving a real masterpiece in modern architecture involved a site in Russia. It was a grant request received in 1992 from the Russian and Finnish Committees for the Restoration of the Alvar Aalto's Viipuri Library (1927–1935). Not long after we did find a way to help, but only after WMF had developed a better mechanism for doing so; a program we called the *World Monuments Watch List of 100 Most Endangered Sites* that was launched in 1995.

The Watch List is a biennial listing of seriously endangered architectural sites of all types and periods from anywhere in the world that are brought to our attention through a nomination process. A new list of endangered sites is compiled every two years by an ever-changing

panel of ten experts who make their selections from hundreds of nominations. The main criteria for placement on the Watch List are that a site must be: *a)* in eminent danger being lost or seriously compromised; *b)* it must be historically and artistically significant, and *c)* the nominator must have the capacity and a viable plan-of-action for saving the resource. The Watch program turns on two theories: *1)* publicizing the plight of the building in the widest possible way, and *2)* leveraging action through strategically applied funding.

To continue with the Viipuri Library example, it was placed on both the 1998 and the 2000 World Monuments Watch lists which helped raise the profile of the international effort to save the building. In 2000 we were pleased to offer a challenge grant in the amount of \$100,000 for exterior restoration work, in particular the restoration of roof and skylights over the reading room. An additional grant was given two years later, which addressed more exterior work and the most urgent interior restoration needs. To the credit of the organizers of this project and its major support group, the International Committee of the Friends of the Viipuri Library, the quality of the restoration work was very high, and on their own they have



Viipuri Library, arch. A. Aalto, 1927–35. Main entrance during restoration works in 2003

made much progress, to the point where the project is soon nearing completion.

It is through the World Monuments Watch list that WMF became involved with three key modernist landmarks in Moscow. The first was Konstantin Melnikov's Rusakov Club (1927–1929) that was placed on the 1996 Watch list. In 2002 the Narkomfin Building (1928–1930) by the architect Moisei Ginzburg joined this list, though here, sadly, there is even less progress to report. Of all the over 200 architectural conservation projects that the World Monuments Fund is addressing in 86 countries at this time, it is the fate of the Narkomfin Building that worries us the most. All of us here today, I believe, are aware of why the Narkomfin Building is so significant. I know that WMF is at this conference in large part to help find solutions for saving this icon in world architecture.

The latest nomination of a Russian modernist landmark in peril is Konstantin Melnikov's personal home near the Arbat district of Moscow. Nominated in 2004 it has been the focus of attention by WMF's London-based affiliate, WMF Britain. The challenge here is to effectively conserve and present the building as a museum to the great architect and to prevent insensitive development of the neighbourhood with oversized, unsightly new construction. Active fundraising for this project is underway by our London office. So far there is every reason to think that the Russian support group of technicians and advocates for this project will see this conservation project through to proper completion.

The stakes are high, and as we all know the chances of success in architectural preservation are not at all guaranteed. Here are two landmarks to modernism that are being destroyed at this very moment. They are 2 Columbus Circle in New York City by the architect Edward Durrell Stone, and the Cyclorama interpretive centre at the famous Gettysburg Battlefield in Pennsylvania by Richard Neutra. I am very sorry to say that both of these examples are the only ones of over 300 sites listed on the Watch list in ten years, which WMF has utterly failed to help. They died in our hands and, I am very ashamed to say, both are in my country, the USA.

Action Strategies

As a relatively small organization that has taken on a huge mandate, the World Monuments Fund places a premium on solutions for effective architectural conservation. I would like to mention here four possible strategies for implementing conservation action at significant modernist buildings as the World Monuments Fund sees it. The process assumes that the first steps are almost always those taken by local historians and special interest groups, who bring the issues to light in the first place. It is not surprising that historians are usually the first to spot the needs for saving historic buildings. After all, they are in the best positions to know the significance and situations

of each. Then, and very importantly, the special interest groups enter the scene – groups that range from local enthusiasts to international professional groups, again such as DOCOMOMO and the Moscow Architectural Preservation Society (MAPS). Their chief purposes are normally to address the issues of: identification, documentation, drawing attention to the problem, and constantly advocating for conservation.

Actual conservation intervention is based on the previous two actions of identification and documentation, and it is at this stage where things become considerably more complicated. It is here where conservation theory is applied and use programming, design, legal requirements, and funding needs must be accommodated.

In light of the life cycle of typical architectural conservation projects the World Monuments Fund has recognized four possible strategies – levels of intervention, if you will – that have proven successful during the first decade of the World Monuments Watch program. They are:

Level I: Simple Advocacy and No Funding

One example of where Watch Listing made a difference with actually very little input from our side was at the previous Radio and Television Building (1935) by Joseph Diongre in Brussels which was threatened with demolition in 1998. Designed in a very sophisticated way to accommodate ten recording studios including one for a symphonic orchestra and an audience for 400 people, it was deemed impossible to re-use by its owners and abandoned in 1995. It was very nearly destroyed to make way for a new building when local preservationists showed that it could be given a new life as a mixed-use office building. All WMF did was put it on List, something that its nominators made much of, by shaming the new owner and the municipal government into doing something about it. Within a few months the problem was solved and the building was saved.

In Israel there is "The White City" in Tel Aviv designed in the Modern Movement Style in the 1920s–1930s by followers of Mendelsohn and Le Corbusier where the main need in 1998 was to develop new design guidelines for alterations to this large, mostly residential, complex. This was accomplished as a result of the hard work of two caring local architects, and members of the Municipality, who understood that Tel Aviv has a wealth of functionalist architecture that will increase in value and be of wider interest with every passing year.

Similar progress is occurring slowly but surely at the Art Schools in Havana, dating from 1961, making it the youngest of all the sites on the World Monuments Watch list. A paradigm of what was intended to be a whole new style in national architecture the Art Schools were built on the golf course of the former Havana Country Club. Radically new in every way – in plan, sitting, details, even its structure of parabolic structural arches supporting thin-



Narkomfin Building in Moscow, arch. M. Ginzburg, I. Milinis, 1928–30. View from the west in 2003



Rusakov Workers' Club in Moscow, arch. K. Melnikov, 1927–29. Condition in 2005



Melnikov House studio in Moscow, arch. K. Melnikov, 1927–29. View from Krivoarbatsky lane in 2004

shelled masonry domes this architecture was and still is really unique. The main problem with WMF helping here has been a United States prohibition on funding anything in Cuba other than for humanitarian aid. Watch listing helped, however, to raise the profile of the project in Cuba and President Fidel Castro determined that its restoration should be added to the priority list of restoration projects in the country. To that end its original architects: Ricardo Porro, Roberto Gottardi and Vittorio Garati met again for the first time in 35 years in Havana six years ago to develop restoration plans for the complex. A lack of funding still plagues the project, but in time this project will be accomplished.

Here are two more examples of where simply “agitating for action” has made a difference. Both are in southern California. One is Richard Neutra’s VDL House (1932) in Los Angeles considered the birthplace of Neutra’s “California Modern Style”. The other is Rudolf Schindler’s King’s Road House and Studio (1922) in West Hollywood that he used for more than four decades as an experimental design centre for indoor and outdoor living. Since Watch listing progress at the former Neutra residence has resulted in the present owner, the California State Polytechnic University, taking a more serious interest in properly looking after the site. The Schindler House is also being taken more seriously as a result of Watch listing, with one positive step being the award of a grant for restoration planning from the Preserve Los Angeles Architecture program of the Getty Grant Program.

In these instances WMF did little more than put the sites on the *List of 100 Most Endangered Sites* as an aid to local preservationists, and advocate from a distance.

Simple listing on an endangered sites list, however, is usually not enough to get a building fully restored. It takes hard work, careful planning and willingness on the part of locals to actually see such conservation projects through to completion. One such site that made the 2002 Watch list and has gone nowhere yet is Moisei Ginzburg’s Narkomfin Building in Moscow. This marvel in planning for communal living, with its several important first-ever design developments, has been a victim of total apathy on the part of the state and most of its inhabitants for several decades. Due to the complex ownership and occupancy situation of the building its nominators and WMF have not been able to do anything to help this highly important and highly endangered building. What can be done here, where several restoration and re-use plans have already been proposed? We must find a solution!

Level II: Advocacy through Watch Listing and Funding of a Work Phase

WMF’s experiences with Melnikov’s Rusakov Club are an example of this somewhat greater level of commitment. The original problem here is that during the Stalin era this

kind of architecture was deemed decadent, and thus its careful upkeep went by the wayside. The building's brilliantly designed multipurpose theatre spaces were gutted of its original furnishings and fittings. In 1992 a theatre group that claimed to want to restore it properly leased it¹, but the problem was a lack of funding.

Twice the Rusakov Club was listed – in 1996 and again in 1998 – on the World Monuments Watch list. With a grant of \$50,000 from American Express Company we launched in 1999 the replacement of the roof that was leaking badly. This work was enjoined by the Moscow Committee for Monument Protection, which also oversaw the project and paid toward the roof restoration work. Our subsequent help to this famous building was only partially successful. Sadly, WMF could not reach accord with the users of the building on the proper replacement of windows in the building. This “misunderstanding” of the way to conserve such significant details as windows caused a stop in the flow of money to the project. It is clear that Melnikov's original double-glazed window designs are a vitally important part of the overall design concept. The remaining windows in the building should be conserved not replaced with just rough approximations of the originals without seeking anyone's approval.

The restoration of Viipuri Library is another example in this category of help through foreign assistance, with a much more careful and technically competent approach being used than has been used at the Rusakov Club.

Similar care on behalf of extremely competent government and technical committees is being taken to restore Mies van der Rohe's famous Tugendhat Villa (1930) in Brno, with the funding being provided through a straightforward national-international funding partnership. WMF's role has been to pay \$600,000 toward for design fees which address the complete restoration, from restoration of the structural problems on its garden elevation, to the precise replication of its furnishings, to restoration of its landscape setting. Here, the technical interventions, complex as they are, should not prove too difficult, since this project is expected to follow the same approach, and be led by the same team, that conserved Adolph Loos's Muller Villa in Prague, which stands as one of the best examples of a properly restored modernist landmark in the world.

Level III: International Advocacy, Major Financial Assistance, and Key Involvement during Project Implementation

The restoration of the Endless Column ensemble in Targu Jiu, Romania, built by the sculptor Constantine Brancusi, is an example of when the instigators of an international

conservation project, through committed partnerships and much hard work, simply applies itself until the project is completed. Built in 1938 the Endless Column ensemble is a memorial to locals who died in the First World War. Designed by Brancusi, who also was born here, and engineered by a Romanian colleague, the Endless Column represents a pivotal moment in the history of modern sculpture. It consists of a 30-meter tall steel column (a composite design) on to which are threaded bronze plated cast iron modules. The Column serves as the terminus of a one kilometre long landscaped alley rising from the town centre below, along which are two other monuments in travertine – the Table of Silence and the Gate of the Kiss. Many years went into advocating for the restoration of this landmark of both Romanian history and Modern art. And finally through careful planning, hard work in fundraising, and countless efforts to lead the project forward among many sceptical decision-makers, the restoration of the whole complex was completed in September 2005. The next step is to build an interpretive centre at the site, which may take another five years. One of the many lessons of the Brancusi Ensemble is that *there is no substitute for vigilance in heritage conservation*. This project was discussed for over fifteen years with all kinds of proposals and false starts; the actual conservation work on the column proper took only five weeks(!).

Level IV: Acquiring a Property in Order to Rescue it

The last level of intervention that WMF has tried is a kind of put-your-life-on-the-line manoeuvre. That is, when all else fails, buy the property! WMF's one experience with this approach was in saving the A. Conger Goodyear House (1939) in Westbury, Long Island, NY. It is a landmark in residential design by Edward Durrell Stone that incorporates an amalgam of ideas in modernist design applied beautifully in residential architecture. This is an instance of where the bulldozers had literally been delivered to the site to demolish the structure. After organizing a last-minute stay-of-execution by a direct approach to the mayor of the town, WMF organized the purchase of the property with two other not-for-profit organizations. The plan was basically to restore the house (e.g. replace the boiler, broken glass, repaint, replace stolen elements) and to sell it to a sympathetic owner. That we did, and the house is now saved with a restrictive covenant, which will protect the property in perpetuity.

It is been said that more than half of the world's built environment was constructed in the 20th century. Of this vast quantity only a miniscule, an infinitesimal, number of buildings is of extremely high quality by “*architects of excellence*” such as Melnikov, Ginzburg, and Aalto. Given this paucity of truly seminal exemplars of Modernist designs, as we have in Moscow, elsewhere in Russia, and beyond, we should stop at nothing to save them.

¹ *The Theatre of Roman Viktyuk [Ed. note].*