

Aleksey Ginzburg

## The Narkomfin Building



*Narkomfin commune house of the Ministry of Finance on Novinsky Boulevard 25, Moscow, arch. M. Ginzburg, I. Milinis, 1928–30. View from South, 1930*

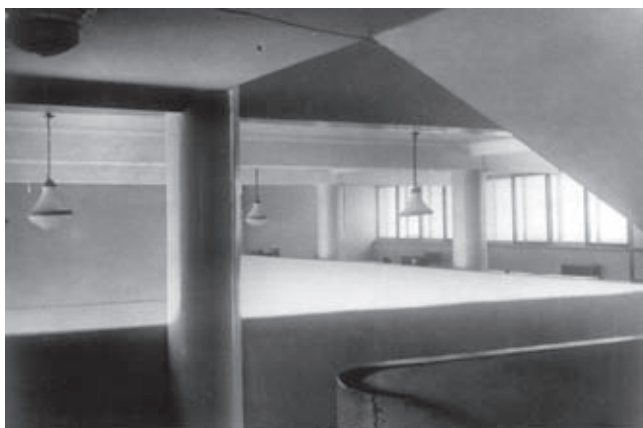


*Narkomfin commune house of the Ministry of Finance on Novinsky Boulevard 25, Moscow, arch. M. Ginzburg, I. Milinis, 1928–30. Interior of the communal block. 1930*

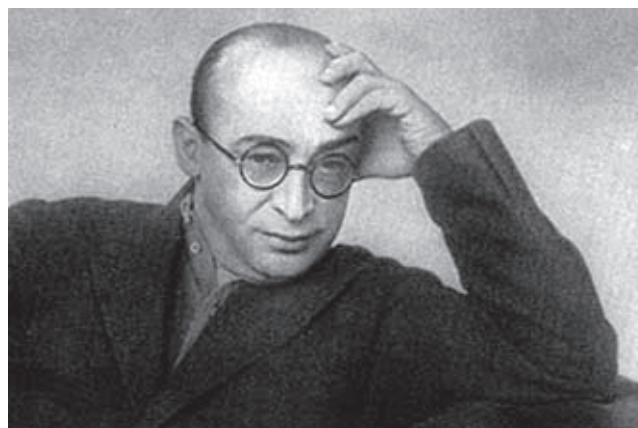
I learned about the Narkomfin building from my father, Vladimir Ginzburg (1930–1997, arch.), son of Moisey Ginzburg. At the time, I was a young man about to enter the Moscow Institute of Architecture and failed to appreciate all the simplicity and brilliance of the design. But my father's stories revealed a special, curiously attractive world in the short 'golden age' from the house's construction to the breakout of war. Obviously, his memories of his childhood days spent there had been interwoven for him – and subsequently for me too – with the image of this structure. The list of talented and un-usual people who had lived there – starting with the man who commissioned and inspired the building, N.A. Milyutin, the People's Commissar for Finance; the author of the house himself, architect Moisey Ginzburg; artist Aleksandr Deyneka; and others – did not immediately bring to mind any connection with the Ministry of Finance, for whose employees it was built. So impressions of my father's childhood, together with some black-and-white, out-of-focus photographs led me to regard this house as something light and radiant, as a building not overworked, as in all books on the history of Modernist architecture, but very much alive. Consequently, in all the various restoration plans for the building, I wanted to restore not merely the structure itself, but also the life in it – to restore not the *Stalker*-like existence [cf. Andrey Tarkovsky's film *Stalker*] led by a handful of families abandoned by the city authorities, but proper, natural life.

There had been several attempts to begin restoring the Narkomfin house. I observed the efforts made by my father, and then began helping him. Unfortunately, all these attempts ended at some stage or other in failure. To begin with, we tried getting public organizations such as the Union of Architects and the Architectural Foundation involved. The Moscow Institute of Architecture had plans to turn the building into a student hostel. And we had talks with several international foundations involved in the restoration of architectural monuments. Their problem was the difficulty of taking part in operations which are not actually restoration, e.g. resettling the current inhabitants of the building (necessary since building work in a structure whose layout is based on a corridor system cannot be broken up into stages), applying for all the permits needed in order to operate in Moscow, laying of new underground utilities connections, and subsequent operation of the building. Moreover, the Narkomfin house is significantly larger than, say, the house of Mel'nikov (the same goes for the sum of investment required).

In the second half of the 1990s various commercial organizations began to appear. The majority of these had



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*Mosei Jakovlevich Ginzburg (1892–1946)*

no interest in the building's architectural value: they regarded it merely as a piece of real estate. In such cases my father tried to explain that the only option here is restoration. He used his authority to exclude changing the building's layout and structure. In 1995 we found what seemed to be an ideal solution. My father began conducting negotiations with an American company one of whose presidents was himself a professional architect. The result of these talks was a restoration project based on the ideas on which we had been working while we had been looking for an investor.

Our work on the restoration project unexpectedly turned out to involve more substantial research than we had initially thought. There was this exciting feeling that every little detail was full of meaning and had its own purpose. During the course of the design work we tried to separate off all the later changes and rediscover the building's initial state. It was at such moments, as I analyzed the architect's intentions, that I was able to assess the house not merely as an image from my father's childhood memories. I had a feeling of the significance and meaning of a compact volume, a very simple and logical structure which cannot be grasped immediately. Everything in this building was 'innovative' as we would say now – everything from the technique of making stone from concrete, similar to the concrete used in the construction of the Bauhaus at the same time in Germany, to the specially designed holders for the glass windows. I was thrilled by the building's 'well-made-ness', that quality which is to be found in all the very best works of architecture and which can be sensed in every part of the Narkomfin building. Still later, when I had the opportunity to go inside residential buildings built by the classics of contemporary Western architecture, I was able to compare internal and external dimensions, height, and scale. I began to understand how precisely all this had been chosen for Ginzburg's creation – and how skillfully single, one-and-a-half, and double heights had been combined in order to create an

illusion of plentiful space in the small apartments. I was impressed by small details such as the way doors situated in the same corridor and leading to upper and lower F-type units had been 'marked' in different colours, and the fact that the prefabricated monolithic ceiling panels made it possible to save money on roof decking.

One of the main distinctive features of the building is the combination of two different types of housing. The Narkomfin building was supposed to be a new type of house that would be transitional between the traditional family dwelling and the new communal way of living. At the same time, however, even the more traditional apartments here are very unusual. They resemble mini-cottages arranged along a corridor as if along an internal street. In spite of their small size, the F-type units seem larger as a result of the alternation of one- and one-and-a-half-height storeys. The upper corridor was not just an element in the house's system of communications; it also served as a recreational space. Also recreational were the open first storey and the usable roof. All in all, the house had a wide range of public spaces linking it with its surroundings. The communal block, linked to the residential part by a second-storey passageway, and the small laundry building, approached by a special path leading through the park, made up a miniature ensemble consisting of three laconic structures.

One of the ideas in our project was to recreate the second, never-built stage of the Narkomfin building. This would have provided space into which to move residents prior to restoring the structure. Another problem we came up against was the need to adapt the communal-living units for use in modern conditions (to this end, we turned to the ideas for compact bathroom and toilet units and studio kitchens developed by Moisey Ginzburg during his time as head of Stroykom). We also proposed building a separate external lift, in order to enable the elevator which had been crudely inserted into the body of the building during the post-war years to be dismantled.



*Narkomfin commune house of the Ministry of Finance on Novinsky Boulevard 25, Moscow, arch. M. Ginzburg, I. Milinis, 1928–30. Model 2004 by Ginzburg architects, Moscow*

We considered the most efficient use for the building to be as an apartment hotel. On the one hand, this freed us from the need to insert the technological infrastructure needed for a conventional hotel; on the other, it made it possible to retain the building's residential function. Of all the possible post-restoration uses for the building's units (as offices, artists' studios, a student hostel, etc.), we wanted to preserve the residential function at all costs. Of course, the units hardly resemble traditional apartments suitable for habitation by several-person families. But they can be used by one or two persons for short- or long-term stays.

Unfortunately, this project too came to nothing. Having won the competition to restore the building (under the rules existent at the time), the American company, in spite of its experience of working with real estate in Moscow, then suddenly got bogged down in a bureaucratic tangle with Moscow's Land Committee. Finding themselves up against strong resistance, they abandoned the project after several months of trying. Several years later, I saw how during construction of the next-door business centre the new driveway turned towards the Narkomfin building and ended up on the site of the never built second wing. It became obvious that this territory had always been reserved for another use. The driveway was laid several metres from the monument, and now vibrations from heavy pass-

ing vehicles are clearly felt inside the building. It was then that I learnt that the Narkomfin building lacks the statutory conservation area which by law should be designated around all architectural monuments.

In 1997 Father died. Only three years later was I able to continue our restoration attempts. I accepted any help that was on offer and shared my information with all who had any desire to take part in our project. Together with the Office for Preservation of Monuments we conducted technical investigations (principally in order to prove to all the feasibility of repairing the building). With the help of A. Zalivako, an enthusiast of and researcher into 1920s architecture, I talked to German architects who had restored the Bauhaus (built using similar technology, as already said). Civilized investors who appreciated Constructivist aesthetics began to appear. However, all recent restoration attempts have stalled for incomprehensible or invisible reasons. In one case, we suddenly learnt that the Moscow Government had handed over the building for a competition in which part of the price paid for the building would be paid to the city – which would make authentic restoration by a commercial investor even more of a spectral prospect. In another we found out that inspection rights had been granted with respect to individual parts of the building (as if it could be divided into parts) – for accommodating a private school in the residential block,

and then for handing over the communal block in return for the building of artists' studios on another site. Various companies sent representatives to the house to talk residents into signing over the rights to their apartments.

When Western architects come to Moscow, they almost always ask me to take them to the Narkomfin building and, blushing, I have to explain to them why it is still in such an appalling condition. The most difficult part is always to explain why so much effort goes not into restoration, but into persuading the authorities of the need to restore this monument. To demolish and rebuild the house from scratch is a frightening alternative, and all pretences that the structure will only be improved as a result are extremely cynical. It's frightening that thanks to the current economic boom the land under the building is regarded by many as more valuable than the building itself; and that in a country which in the 1920s provided the inspiration that raised culture to new heights all over the world, structures from that age are today in a ruinous state, unneeded by anyone. When I went to Berlin in May 2005 for a conference on preserving 20<sup>th</sup>-century architecture, I saw how carefully the Germans treat the legacy of the 1920s and other monuments of modern architecture.

I'd like to say once more how important it is to preserve not just the Narkomfin building's external skin, but also its experimental essence – that innovative quest for new forms of housing that was conducted in the 1920s in Russia. For it is this that makes the building a monument of history and architectural thought. It is the link between a building's structure and its functions that creates a clear architectural image, one that is not eroded by formal techniques.

We are now able to understand yet another important quality of this house. Erected during a time of hunger and poverty in a country where everything was in ruin, the Narkomfin building has nevertheless been strong enough to stand for so many years without capital renovation, restoration, and proper upkeep. But we can no longer afford to keep testing its strength. Each new year it seems that the house must collapse and that the current year will be its last.



*Narkomfin commune house of the Ministry of Finance on Novinsky Boulevard 25, Moscow, arch. M. Ginzburg, I. Milinis, 1928–30. East façade, 2004*



*Narkomfin commune house of the Ministry of Finance on Novinsky Boulevard 25, Moscow, arch. M. Ginzburg, I. Milinis, 1928–30. Laundry house, 2005*