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Burevestnik Factory Club. Short Notes on the Restoration and Conversion Project



Burevestnik workers club, Moscow, 1927–29, arch. K. Melnikov, after the restoration in 2003

In 1928 the workers union at the Burevestnik Shoe Factory came up with the idea of building a workers' club. The Moscow City Authority gave permission for land to be set aside for the new building, and the union commissioned Konstantin Melnikov to design it. Among architects then in quest of new design and engineering solutions Melnikov was the most active and the boldest. His designs struck contemporaries for their originality and architectural expressiveness, innovative engineering and treatment of functions, and non-standard approach to building types. In 1927 alone he designed four workers' clubs: the Rusakov, Frunze, Zuev, and Kauchuk.

Melnikov's approach to the design of workers' clubs was reported extensively in journals of the time, but was most clearly formulated by Melnikov himself at a later date: "When I designed club buildings I wasn't designing just a building but future happiness, architecture for the great uplift that would come with the construction of a new life."¹

The shape, structure, and layout of the Burevestnik Club are largely predetermined by the configuration of the plot of land allocated to it. This was described by Melnikov himself as "narrow with a slanting alley" along the street front. The club comprises a group of rectangular structures of different sizes. The three principal structures are placed along a single transverse axis extending at an angle to 3rd Rybinskaya ulitsa. The composition is completed by a small three-storey annex on the eastern side and a forward-set four-storey tower with a complex five-petal floor plan. The architectural and sculptural character of this tower embellishes the space around it and introduces visual equilibrium into the structure of the club's compact main facade.

As in other designs by Melnikov, the brilliant organization of interior space is highly impressive. Under the stage on the first floor are a light vestibule and cloakroom. In addition to its stalls, the auditorium has side stands for use during sporting competitions. In such cases, the chairs in the stalls could be removed and the auditorium itself and adjoining sports hall (designed to be separated from the former by a sliding partition wall) would become one space. There was a skylight in the roof above the side stands. In the foyer on the first floor there were plans for a swimming pool to be built under the auditorium (just as at the Rusakov Club). Another group of spaces comprised the club rooms on the first floor underneath the sports hall. Access to these was through the foyer or a separate entrance in the annex on the east side. The tower, a free-standing structure, was intended to house rooms for club sessions. The three staircase blocks are all different, their designs varying in accordance with function. Melnikov regarded his club as a multi-functional structure and was one of the first in the history of world architecture to propose a design with transformable interior spaces.

Construction of the club finished in January 1930 after enormous complications. Externally, deviations from the original design were only slight. They were a matter of larger walls, increased exterior length, and changes to the positioning of partition walls. This did not affect

¹ Cited from K. S. Melnikov, *The Architecture of My Life in: Konstantin Stepanovich Melnikov*, compiled by A. A. Strigalev and I. V. Kokkinaki, Moscow, 1985, p.80.



Burevestnik workers club, Moscow, 1927–29, arch. K. Melnikov. Gymnastic Hall before and after the restoration in 2003



the building's appearance as a work of architecture. On the other hand, Melnikov's innovative proposals for organization of the interior space were never carried out in full. As in other buildings by this architect, the "living", i. e. sliding, partitions were not installed due to problems with finance and lack of the necessary technology and engineering. The swimming pool likewise remained unbuilt, since this part of town had no sewerage and water systems.

Melnikov specified that the main facade and surfaces of the side-ends of the stage block should be plastered using high-quality plaster with careful smoothing of the intermediate layers. The unplastered brickwork of the club's courtyard side was supposed to retain its natural red colour and not be painted. On the street-facing facade particular attention was paid to the impression made by the combination of the transparent tower and the heavy mass

of the wall concealing the stage block. The five-petal tower seemed light and transparent since the spaces between its main pillars were occupied by large windows.

We get an idea of the original interior decoration, structural design, and equipment from photographs taken in the 1930s and from individual surviving fragments discovered during the course of investigation of the building. The second floor of the tower has original decoration intact in the "Stalinist Classical" style². There are interesting photographs that give an idea both of the way the ceiling in the foyer was painted and of the damage done to the latter's interior by the decision not to build the swimming pool. Visual perception of the foyer is distorted by the fact that there are twice as many reinforced-concrete columns as there would have been had the pool been built. These columns end in pyramidal capitals of various sizes that support the ceiling. The auditorium and sports halls are spanned by metal girders to the lower parts of which are attached suspended ceilings.

Melnikov's "ordinary" window frames and doors "with a primitive cross-section" were probably replaced during the course of routine maintenance work done on the building. When you compare photographs taken of the club facade during the 1930s and 60s, you can't fail to notice that the original window transoms in the tower have been replaced by transoms with smaller pieces of glass. Also from a later date are glass blocks in place of the window transoms in the narrow strips of continuous glazing on the western and eastern facades and in the lower tier of the tower.

Time has shown the Burevestnik club to be a unique example of a new type of public building. Its architecture and interior layout reflect a new rational approach to building design and to exploitation of the attainments of rapidly developing industry at the beginning of the 20th century. This building is an architectural monument protected by the Russian Government.

At the end of the 1990s the Burevestnik Club changed hands. The Burevestnik Factory no longer had any need for a workers' club, and the municipal authorities showed no interest in preserving its cultural function. Initially, the new owners wanted to hold "ultimate fights" in the auditorium but subsequently rejected this idea, and the building was converted for use as a fitness centre under the name «Tatami Club». There are now three sports halls for oriental single-combat classes, aerobics, and dancing, as well as a Japanese-style club restaurant, baths, etc. At nighttime discos are held in the large hall.

Unfortunately, the new owners were unable to fully appreciate the cultural potential of the "piece of real estate" they had acquired, and the programme for use of the building was determined by exclusively short-term commercial considerations. It has to be admitted that Moscow's committee for preservation of historic buildings has failed to devise an effective mechanism for encouraging priority use of this building, in spite of the fact that Burevestnik is a cultural monument of regional importance.

² The first floor of the tower accommodated a buffet; the basement, toilets and a hairdresser's; the second floor, classrooms; the third, a reading room; and the fourth, a library. On the flat roof there was a solarium. 4. Under Melnikov's original design, each facet of the windows in the tower was continuous glass without a transom.

Detailed investigation of the building was carried out, and its fundamental structures were reinforced. Although many problems concerning particular parts of the building remain unresolved, sufficient historical and research material was gathered during development of the restoration drawings to enable a start to be made on systematic scientific restoration. However, at this point the client decided to make do with restoration of the facades only (the rest of the building was merely renovated). A firm of architects was commissioned to draw up plans for temporary alteration of the interior layout and adaptation of the building for use as a sports and health club, but without irreversible changes to the historical layout or the building's structural basis. No architectural restorers were hired for detailed design work or for work on the building's interiors.

In spite of financial restrictions, the main restoration of the facades has been carried out in full. Later add-ons have been dismantled; window apertures that had been bricked up have been re-opened; and the original pattern of windows and doors has been restored. Regrettably, the lanterns in the auditorium have not been exposed and the quality of work on the roof also leaves much to be desired.

The main debate during the process of obtaining planning permission centred on the colour scheme and finishing materials for the facades. According to old photographs and Melnikov's notes on his project, the principal facade and side-ends of the stage block were plastered, while the courtyard-side facades were left as brick. Research did not produce a definite answer to the question of whether the courtyard facades had been painted from the start. At the client's request, the restoration project set out different options for colour schemes, including for painting the courtyard-side facades. In selecting the finish and colours actually used in the restoration project, the Moscow city architectural authorities based their decision on the character of surrounding buildings.

The Moscow Government awarded the Burevestnik Club a prize for best restoration project in 2002. Architects involved in the project regard this not as their personal achievement, but as long-awaited recognition from the city authorities of the fact that there are architectural monuments from the Constructivist era.



Burevestnik workers club, Moscow, 1927–29, arch. K. Melnikov. Vestibule before the restoration in 2000



Burevestnik workers club, Moscow, 1927–29, arch. K. Melnikov. Clubroom before the restoration in 2000