

Clementine Cecil

The Melnikov House-Studio

The Melnikov House-Studio was one of the most controversial sites to be discussed during the Heritage at Risk conference in Moscow in April 2006. A round table was dedicated to the fate of the house and it rapidly became clear that a lack of unity of opinion among Moscow's preservation and architectural community concerning the future of the house, threaten it as much as its disputed legal status.

The House-Studio was constructed in 1927–1929 by architect Konstantin Melnikov for himself and his family and it is an international icon of the Modern movement. At the time Melnikov was the star architect of the Soviet Union, having won the Grand Prix for his Soviet pavilion at the Paris Exposition in 1925. His was one of the few private houses to be built during the Soviet period. Although radical in appearance and reminiscent of American grain silos, peasant building techniques were employed in the construction of the house, making it extremely efficient economically. The hexagonal windows that pierce the interlocking cylinders of the house, are redolent of the ramparts of fortresses, while the rough plastered brick texture of the inside walls are taken from church architecture. Large internal spaces were possible thanks to innovative building techniques introduced by the architect such as self-reinforcing floors built from a waffle-like grid. Thanks to these windows the top studio is flooded with light, especially in the morning, and after he was ostracized from Moscow's architectural community in the 1930s, Konstantin Melnikov spent his days here painting. After his death in 1974, his son, Viktor Melnikov, also a painter, lived and worked in the house.

Viktor died in February 2006, leaving his part of the house to the Russian state, on the condition that they create a museum to Konstantin and Viktor Melnikov in the building. Though Viktor was resident in the house until his death, he owned only half of it. His sister, Ludmila Melnikova, owned the rest. She died in 2003 and her son, Alexei Ilganaev, inherited her share. Long before Viktor's death he fell out with his youngest daughter Elena, who deceived her father into signing his share of the house over to her. He fought her in the courts for the last two years of his life.

In December 2005, Viktor and Ekaterina defeated Elena's claim to own half of the house. In March Elena finally dropped her appeal against the court ruling. However, the situation was complicated when it transpired shortly after Viktor's death that Ilganaev had sold his half of the house to Russian senator Sergei Gordeev. Gordeev professes to want to create a museum in the house. However, Viktor Melnikov clearly stated in his will that he wants the house to be a state-run museum and his daughter Eka-



Melnikov house, view from the rear side in 2006

terina, executor of the will, is determined to fulfil her father's wish. Senator Gordeev's intentions are laudable but there is no precedent of a privately-owned museum in an architectural monument in Russia and Ekaterina and Russia's preservation community are therefore nervous about such a possibility. The Cultural Ministry have not declared an interest in the house. They appear unwilling to enter into negotiations in this complicated situation. Viktor's will comes into force on August 6th 2006, six months after Viktor's death.

These ownership disputes have paralysed the maintenance of the house. The Moscow Architecture Preservation Society (MAPS) raised £15,000 from the Boris Yeltsin Foundation in December 2005 to conduct a survey of the house following increasing subsidence problems due to intensive development in the area. However, in the light of the property dispute that followed Viktor's death, the Foundation wisely chose to withdraw the grant until the dispute be settled.

In June 2006 the archive of Konstantin and Viktor Melnikov was transferred to the Russian State Shchusev Mu-



Melnikov House-Studio in Moscow, 1927–29, arch. K. Melnikov. Interior in 2005

seum of Architecture. Sergei Gordeev is to provide funds for the cataloguing and maintenance of the archive. In the meantime, a new dispute has arisen, over author's rights. Elena claims that the author's rights to her grandfather's work lie with her. Ekaterina is disputing her claim in the courts. Rights to Melnikov's work would potentially be a source of income for the maintenance of the house, but again, family disputes are hindering any such possibility.

The house was included in the 2006 World Monuments Fund Watch List on the grounds of four man-made threats: development pressures, inappropriate prior conservation, lack of financial resources and lack of public awareness. Also one natural threat: water drainage, which is a direct result of the man-made threat of development pressures. Due to intensive development around the Melnikov House, ground water is draining on to the site of the house, for everywhere else it is blocked by the concrete walls of underground garages. This is causing dry rot and will lead to serious damage of the house's foundations if it is not stopped.

Restoration work was undertaken in the house in the 1990s, which led to the destruction of many original details. Poor conservation work has led to further complications with the building. Due to a suspected combination of subsidence and a leaky roof, cracks have appeared in the ceiling of the top studio. Ekaterina is concerned about the bathroom floor, which is rotting, and about the large window on the front of the house. The bottom of the window frame is breaking under the weight of the window that appears to be slipping. This desperately needs attention.

It is hoped that the Ministry of Culture will take an active role in the creation of a museum in cooperation with anyone else with a legal claim to the house. The sooner the ownership dispute is resolved, the sooner the house can be tended with the careful attention that it needs.



Melnikov house, view from the rear side in 2004. Victor Melnikov, the son of the architect Konstantin Melnikov showing the house to some student visitors