

ROUGH DIAMOND

Ostensibly built as a prototype for mass housing in 1929, the Melnikov House in Moscow is in fact a rare, if crumbling, gem of Russian avant-garde architecture

PORTRAIT: LEO BALANEV WRITERS: JONATHAN BELL, ELLIE STATHAKI





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Modern Russia's complex relationship with its avant-garde architectural past is well documented. Photographs of the crumbling husks of once pristine geometric visions of historic modern architecture are widely circulated, supporting the impression that all the new Russia cares about are shiny displays of the here and now. As you can see in this issue, this is manifestly not the case. However, the Melnikov House remains a good argument for the prosecution.

Born in 1890, Konstantin Melnikov entered the Russian art education system after a chance discovery of his innate talent. He began with painting, but by the time of the Revolution he had joined a fledgling group of innovative planners and designers. In 1927, he made an unprecedented request for land to build his own house in the centre of Moscow. New individual private houses were practically unheard of at the time and it was thanks to a sympathetic official that permission was granted. Ostensibly, the house on Krivoarbatsky Lane was a prototype for mass housing for workers, showcasing new techniques, materials and forms. The result, completed in 1929, may have been rich in formal innovation, but wasn't exactly a cramped Narkomfin apartment. Over multiple storeys and 250 sq m, Melnikov created a generous living space and two vast split-level studio areas, united by a spiral staircase and lit by bands of diamond-shaped windows.

Beneath the white render, it is built from brick, with timber flooring

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3. **EVGENY ASSE** (pictured previous page), www.asse.ru
4. **SERGEY SKURATOV**
www.skuratov-arch.ru
5. **TOTAN KUZAEMBAEV**
www.totan.ru
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Vladimir Ionovich Plotkin, www.reserve.ru
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INSIDE STORY

The house is still home to Melnikov's granddaughter, as well as the entire archive of his paintings and architectural drawings, and a collection of antique furniture

conceived from an interlocking lattice of planks, rather than conventional joists. As a result of this rather bold move, as well as the low quality of materials available, the house is now very fragile. Melnikov died in 1974, but his granddaughter Ekatarina Karinskaya still lives there, amid the architect's entire archive, as well as antique furniture and carpets.

Karinskaya was born in the house, moved during the war, then returned and has remained there, with her husband, since the 1990s. While the building is protected, the maintenance help they receive is not enough. Signs of wear are obvious, both inside and out. The ground level has been dropping in places and a large crack has recently appeared in the walls. 'I am worried that it is slowly getting destroyed,' says Karinskaya. 'I would love to restore it properly and see it open as a museum.' Heritage preservation group the Russian Avant-garde Foundation is on her side, setting up the Melnikov House Museum to help safeguard its future – Zaha Hadid and Rem Koolhaas are among their trustees.

A sensitive historical site as well as a private home, Melnikov House is off-limits to architecture tourists. But accompanied by architect, editor of *Archiproba* magazine and Strelka alumnus Tamara Muradova, we secured rare access and invited some of Russia's key architects to join us. Enter Oleg Shapiro and Dmitry Likin of Wowhaus, the team behind the design of the Strelka Institute and many of the recent Gorky Park installations; Evgeny Asse, respected Moscow-based architect and dean of MARCH, Moscow's newest independent architecture school; and Sergey Kuznetsov, one half (with Sergey Tchoban) of the SPEECH partnership, who curated the 2010 and 2012 Venice Architecture Biennale Russian Pavilion.

'I consider the Melnikov House one of the most important international architectural monuments of the 20th century and one of the few real gems in Moscow architecture,' Asse says. 'It's a shame on our state and society that this masterpiece stays in such lamentable condition. We will continue to fight for its preservation.' Shapiro seems to agree with him wholeheartedly. 'In Russia the avant-garde architecture has been undervalued for years,' he says. 'On the positive side, it's thanks to that that the house has remained intact. Bureaucrats' negligence turned out to be a protection against poor quality conservation work, which virtually destroyed most historical houses in Moscow.'

Chaotic, in need of conservation, and a focus of architectural debate in Russia and abroad, the Melnikov House is still above all, a unique and remarkable home. ★ www.melnikovhouse.org



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MOSCOW

At the Strelka Institute, by Wowhaus

When the Strelka Institute for Media, Architecture and Design launched its plans at the 2010 Venice Architecture Biennale – with an education programme curated by OMA/AMO and Rem Koolhaas, no less – the architecture world’s attention turned to Moscow. Occupying a prime location within the site of the disused Red October chocolate factory in central Moscow, Strelka HQ has been designed by Wowhaus, a small but influential architecture outfit whose co-founders, Oleg Shapiro and Dmitry Likin, are also part of the Strelka founding team. Together with a group of publishing and technology entrepreneurs Alexander Mamut, Sergei Adonyev, Ilya Oskolkov-Tsentsiper and developer Sergey Gordeev, they complete the school’s

board of trustees. Wowhaus’ design reflects Strelka’s modern, thought-provoking teachings. The building is spread around a courtyard and includes the school, an outdoor event space with a small amphitheatre and a popular bar with a roof terrace on top. Built in natural materials that age well, the interior is a combination of bespoke elements and vintage designer pieces. The team’s task was to ‘create a new type of public space, a “third place”, coming after work/study place and home’, and they have certainly achieved it. A bustling creative hub, Strelka is the undisputed home of the design-aware Muscovite and the perfect location for the Russian capital’s Wallpaper* office.
www.strelka.com; wowhaus.ru



STAR READERS

This picture, art director Meirion Pritchard (on mezzanine), art editor Sarah Douglas, features director Nick Compton and deputy architecture editor Ellie Stathaki are all on the same page

Custom-made tables, €1,500 each, by Wowhaus, for Strelka. On table, Moscow toy set, RUB2320 (€57) by Anastasia

Scherbakova and Vasilyi Perfiliev, from Shusha Toys. Books, from a selection, from Art Lebedev. Volgadacha model, by Bernaskoni Architectural Bureau. 'Rocking' bench, €600, by Victor Freydenberg. 'Elle' stool, price on request, by Napalm. 'P' bookshelf/clock, \$9,000, by Yaroslav Rassadin

Opposite, interiors director Benjamin Kempton in front of the Strelka Institute Rolls-Royce Ghost EWB, RUB9,239,060 (€230,530)