

Fritz Barth

**Konstantin Melnikow und sein Haus**

64 pp. with 106 illus., 210 x 270 mm, hard-cover, German edition  
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64 pp. with 106 illus., 210 x 270 mm, hard-cover, English edition  
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Konstantin Melnikow (1890–1974) is unquestionably one of the outstanding architects of the 20th century – in spite of the fact that he fell silent early, leaving behind only limited work that was insufficiently publicized, and restricted almost exclusively to Moscow, the city of his birth in which he spent nearly his entire life and which did not appreciate him. He was raised in humble circumstances, but enjoyed an excellent education. Beginning in the mid-1920s, after the turmoil that followed the war, revolution and civil war, his career soared at almost meteoric speed as he took the lead in the young Soviet architecture movement with completely autonomous, highly artistic buildings that were free from dogmatism of any kind. Even more rapid than his rise to fame was his downfall: Treated with general hostility, he was unable to defend himself against the accusation of formalism when Stalin put an end to architectural ventures and experiments around the mid-1930s. He was expelled from the architects' association and was banned from practicing as an architect for the remaining four decades of his life.

In the late 1920s, at the peak of his career, he had the opportunity to build a house for himself and his family in Moscow, in which he was then able to live until the end of his life. This house, a memorable symbiosis of almost peasantlike simplicity and extreme radicalness, is one of the most impressive, surprising and probably most enigmatic works produced by 20th-century architecture. Its simplicity is only outward; in reality this is a highly complex work which links together the elements of architecture explicitly and inextricably, which takes a clear and completely autonomous stand and which, in a way that little else has done, raises the question as to the nature of genuinely architectonic thinking. In essayistic form the book attempts to follow the paths laid out in the architect's work from the perspective of an architect.

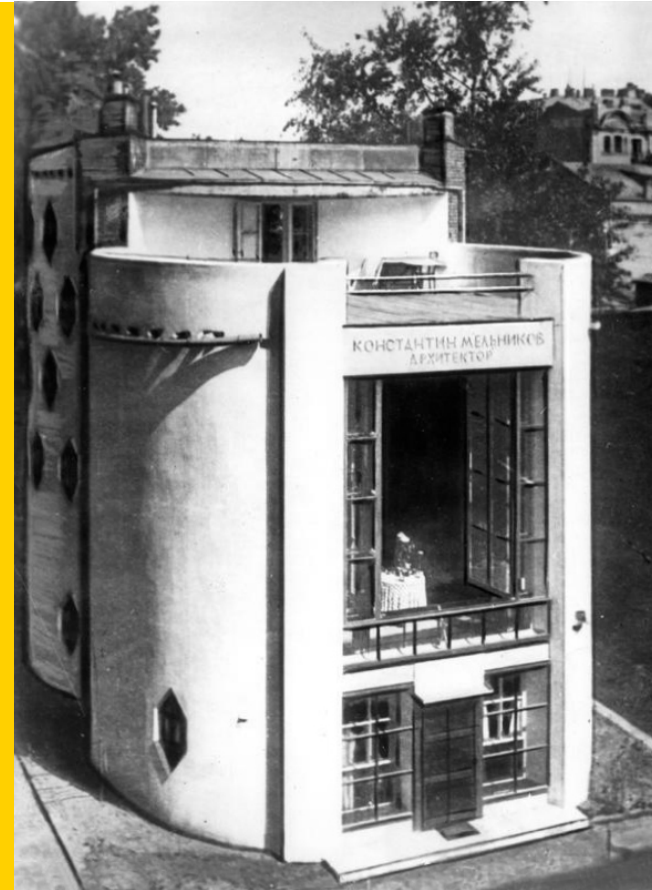
Fritz Barth studied architecture in Stuttgart and Zurich. He runs an architect's practice in Fellbach near Stuttgart, teaches at the TU Darmstadt and is the author of a series of books, including a study on the iconography of 16th-century Italian gardens (*Die Villa Lante in Bagnaia*, 2001), a monograph about the Bohemian Baroque master builder Johann Santini-Aichel (*Santini*, 2004) and a study of the fortifications of Francesco di Giorgio Martini (*Martial Signifiers. Fortress Complexes by Francesco di Giorgio Martini*, 2011).

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FRITZ BARTH  
KONSTANTIN MELNIKOV AND HIS HOUSE



The house Konstantin S. Melnikov (1890-1974) built for himself and his family in Moscow in the late 1920s, a memorable symbiosis of almost peasantlike simplicity and extreme radicalness, is one of the most impressive, surprising and probably most enigmatic works produced by 20th-century architecture.

Its simplicity is misleading; actually, what we find ourselves confronted with is a highly complex work which links together the elements of architecture explicitly and inextricably, which takes a clear and completely autonomous stand and which, in a way that little else has done, raises the question as to the nature of genuinely architectonic thinking.

In essayistic form the book attempts to follow the paths laid out in the architect's work from the perspective of the architectonic.

Front jacket:

Alexander Rodchenko,  
Melnikov on his roof terrace, 1929,  
© VG Bildkunst, Bonn, 2015.

M. A. Ilyin, Melnikov's house, 1931,  
© The Schusev State Museum of  
Architecture, Moscow, 2015.

Rear jacket:

Melnikov's house, anonymous  
photography, 1930s.

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## A FEW PRELIMINARY REMARKS

*What my eyes beheld was simultaneous,  
but what I shall now write down will be successive,  
because language is successive.*

Borges, *The Aleph*

**ARCHITECTURE IS A WEB** of many different threads, interwoven, interlinked and entangled in all sorts of different ways. However, this image immediately becomes less vivid if we expand the metaphor to describe the fact that the threads frequently have very different, contradictory or even mutually exclusive characteristics and, what is more, seem to be trying to pull the whole web into all kinds of different directions. There is little more one can say, in other words, than that architecture is characterised by complex and contradictory relations and conditions that have highly divergent trends. The business of architecture, then, would be to mediate between these heterogeneous claims, requirements and components, and the work of an architect would be that of a moderator. The picture of architecture that emerges is thus of something assembled – an image that everyday experience confirms as correct.

Let us pick two basic givens from the multitude of factors which constitute architecture or by which it is determined – givens that can be expected to elucidate the situation: the fields of art and of technology, two antagonistic poles frequently mentioned in the same breath and associated with



each other, within whose field of tension architecture seems to be located somewhere – or whose forces affect it in such a way that it continues to be in a more or less stable position – or is pulled back and forth between them.

However, things immediately get somewhat confused when we recall that in Greek ›art‹ is called τέχνη (technē), which can be equally well be translated as ›technology‹, so that it is probably also possible or even necessary (at least as far as their origin is concerned) to think of the two antagonists – as the ancient Greeks obviously did – as something shared, something undivided. Etymologically τέχνη is derived from the Indo-European root ›\*tek‹, which means something like ›construct‹ or ›build‹ and is especially linked to the art of the carpenter; it recurs, among others, in such words as ›architect‹ and ›architecture‹. The assertion that architecture is defined in the field of tension of art and technology, that it can be located somewhere on the line between the two points, needs to be challenged in view of this background of linguistic and conceptual history.

In this context we might also question why architecture, which in its archaic derivation from construction and building helps define the once undivided field of technology and art, the point of departure for both disciplines, is now assigned a role forced into passivity, to be thought of merely as the area where the spheres of art and technology overlap.

Yet architecture could also be understood in a different way – as something that perhaps does not necessarily call for the modern separation of art and technology – or, from a radical point of view, does not even permit it.

Still, in order to be able to think about architecture, we cannot help inquiring about art and technology; as we do so, we will not refer to the origin they have in common, but actually make the dichotomy the starting point of our investigation.

It may be useful here to take a brief look at something that legitimises maybe not necessarily architecture, but definitely building – that is to say, purpose. Unlike art, ›fine‹ or ›pure‹

art, which, at least according to an idealistic view, can derive its legitimacy only from itself, the existence of a building is always rooted in something that is located outside itself. Even if the essence or the essential part of architecture remains untouched by particular purposes, the very fact that architecture has a specific purpose is the basis of its existence, and it is hardly, if at all, possible to imagine architecture without it.

Here a distinction should be made between purpose as the fundamental legitimation of architecture and additional concerns, such as certain specifications expressed by the client, or the type of concerns that could be described as the architect's inner motivation and that as a general rule drive his work far more strongly than any more or less abstractly experienced ›business of architecture‹ – such factors as environmental issues, his social responsibility, or his personal vanity, all of which may easily be left out of consideration without compromising architecture as such.

However, architecture cannot be detached from the field defined by the two poles of art and technology. As far as technology is concerned, this is evident. If architecture were to be dissociated from technology, it would no longer be linked to building and thus lose its exclusive perceptibility, quickly degenerating into a mere metaphor.

We have a more complicated situation where art is concerned. For of course building without it is not only conceivable, but seems intimately linked to the gloomy reality of what is being built every day. Indeed, hardly anything is likely to discourage most clients as successfully as the architect's genuine, sincere artistic ambition – and at the same time hardly anything is as unbearable as the insistent claim to art status that a considerable part of the more ambitious buildings shamelessly parade, nicely covering up the very fact that they lack genuinely architectonic qualities.

And here the term ›architectonic‹ makes its appearance. We hope it will prove helpful as we attempt to define what it is that actually constitutes architecture, in other words,

what is at its core, thus coming closer to that which determines architecture not from its periphery, but from its inner centre. To be sure, one might object that the idealistic construction of something referred to as ›architectonic‹ is little more than a rhetorical operation whose objective is to pass off as substantial an annoying vacuum at the centre by filling it with a mere term – however, there is an indisputable advantage to reflections on what this term is all about: much that would have to be included when speaking about architecture can be left aside – the architectonic would be construed as a principle and as such be free of all the entanglements and secondary restrictions that give one such a lot to chew over when discussing the term ›architecture‹.

Let us take another look at the three givens from whose constellation architecture cannot be separated: technology, art and purpose. The latter appears a little strange in this context; it refuses to blend organically into the elegant dichotomy of τέχνη. And yet – would architecture, conceived without a purpose, or at least detached from it, still really be architecture? Or would we only then be able to regard it as pure art and it would thus be in true accord with itself?

At all events, the architectonic could be regarded as a field that is defined by the three givens of technology, art and purpose – but also as a formative force in which the three are present, not weighted and not in the sense of a conflation or combination, but as a consistent entity, as which the individual aspects can be thought of together or into which they can be thought together, and where their contradiction is resolved.

The architectonic could then be understood as that in which art, technology and purpose are blended, merge with each other or reciprocally emerge from each other.

Here, not without good reason, we must ask ourselves whether this interpretation can be used as a guideline for an architect's work beyond the conceptual level, and if so, in what form the resulting genuinely architectonic thinking might be manifested.

The statement that the perception of architecture basically happens simultaneously will not go unchallenged, since a building is experienced as a spatially and chronologically structured sequence of impressions. And yet the statement is not incorrect: Relating to the interplay of what constitutes perception, the impression, like that of a sound, has consistent simultaneity. However, if we expand the observation by the interpretation that inevitably completes it – which cannot be thought of otherwise than as a verbalisation – then the aspects of what was seen must be put in a necessarily linear and thus successive chronological order. Something remarkable takes place at this point: The consistency of what was seen (which of course, given its mere physical existence, must basically be free of contradictions) disintegrates and becomes fragmented. Here too, conceptions with a tendency toward the classical will remain largely free of contradictions, but in other cases paradoxes, aporias and paralogisms are uncovered – not inevitably, but primarily in those architectonic structures that are designed to that end or that at least comprise such elements – in other words, in the case of architects who could be subsumed under a general, i. e., not a historical, definition of Baroque. To imagine this, try your hand at an adequate description of even simple elements from the repertory of Borromini, of Santini's Chapel of St. Anne in Panenské Břežany, which seems quite uncomplicated at first glance – or Melnikov, for that matter.

The difficulty of describing and therefore interpreting complex and possibly contradictory architecture lies in translating the architectonic into the structure predefined by language. Language and architecture, notwithstanding frequent, not entirely unfounded analogies between them, are subject to their own, completely different, rules and basic conditions. At this point our attention is drawn to the phenomenon of genuinely architectonic thought. Architectonic thought differs from linguistic thought – whose monopolistic omnipresence all too often obstructs the view of other things – not least because it is able to perceive things and con-

nections as something simultaneous, without having to accept a necessity of grammatical order. This is more than an analogy to the impression of consistent simultaneity while experiencing architecture which we noted earlier – this simultaneity is the goal and object of designing (which has to be seen as the actual architectonic process), may it itself be structured chronologically and deal with isolated individual aspects.

Architectonic thinking is thus characterised by the fact that rather than regarding precisely this structural difference between the simultaneous nature of perception and the successive nature of the design process as a conflict, it must base and orient its strategies with that difference in mind; in other words, decisions that necessarily need to be made one at a time must be taken with the aim that there will be final simultaneous consistency that meets with and reflects the conditions of perception, and that the architectonic structure must at all times be included in the thought process as an entity that can be consistently experienced.

How this can become manifest in built structures shall be shown exemplarily by an examination of the house that Konstantin Melnikov built for himself in Moscow in the late 1920s.

#### KONSTANTIN MELNIKOV AND HIS HOUSE

**KONSTANTIN MELNIKOV** is without doubt one of the outstanding architects of the 20th century. This is despite the fact that he fell silent early, leaving behind only limited work, insufficiently publicised, and restricted almost exclusively to Moscow, the city of his birth in which he spent almost his entire life and which did not appreciate him – and which even today treats his heritage quite abominably.

Born to a family of rural origin in 1890, the fourth of five children, he grew up in humble circumstances – his father could afford only two years of schooling for him; early on, he developed a passion for drawing that his parents strongly encouraged. By a fortunate coincidence, Vladimir Chaplin, a wealthy engineer who was interested in art, became aware of his talent, took him under his wing, actively promoted him and made it possible for the fifteen-year-old to enter the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture, then probably the best training centre for architects in Russia. He remained there for 12 years; after concluding his general education, he initially studied painting, in which his achievements were quite considerable, and finally switched to architecture in 1914, completing his studies three years later. His training may thus be described as very sound, and not only in regard to its technical aspects; the school maintained the tradition of a somewhat austere romantic Classicism that drew upon a specifically Russian adaptation of French Revolutionary architecture and left little room for fashionable trends such as Art Nouveau. His student work, even though characterised toward the end by an increasing striving for independence, does not leave the academic sphere – it shows a solid knowledge of classical antiquity and of the Renaissance, and one may assume that he was



Melnikov in student uniform, 1910





Student projects 1914, 1916  
Soviet Pavilion, Exposition des  
Artistes Décorateurs, Paris 1925

no stranger to the architecture of the Baroque recently rehabilitated by Gurlitt and Wölfflin, as a few characteristic features of his later architecture suggest.

Certain peculiarities of the indigenous and somewhat perverse Classicism taught at the Moscow school were to remain with Melnikov throughout his career, although it is not very simple to discern them among all the architectural undertakings that occasionally border on the extravagant, celebrating novelty and differentness. Initially, however, his work is anchored in the traditional, showing no inclination toward the avant-garde tendencies that arose in Moscow beginning in 1913 at the latest.

The Revolution is the great turning point; with it a new architecture sets in with somewhat forced vehemence, and during the decade that follows the architects work with apparent enthusiasm on the formulation of an architectural language they intend to be the expression, and perhaps the midwife, of this new architecture, violently attacking each other and conducting fierce trench warfare and factional disputes. Initially, to be sure, only on paper – the consequences of war, revolution, civil war and war communism make building impossible.

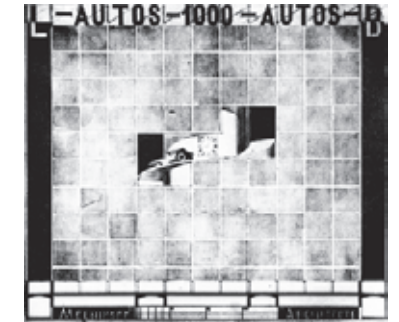
By the time the situation gradually improves toward the mid-1920s, Melnikov has adopted a completely independent stance that enables him to take a position at the forefront of the young Soviet architecture. He does so not as a representative of one of the numerous schools that have sprung up like mushrooms after the Revolution, but with the greatest possible autonomy, so much so that he refuses ever to repeat himself, indeed seems to vehemently reject anything that could be associated with typification and permanent definition – his architecture is to be constantly new, a state of everlasting revolution, and something like a coherent work can be deduced at most from motifs and techniques, i.e., second-order givens, and not by means of the direct manifestations of what are extremely different buildings and designs.

His actual career as an architect begins with two temporary buildings for exhibitions, the second of which, the Soviet Pavilion at the Exposition des Artistes Décorateurs in Paris, brings him international recognition in 1925. — Exhibition buildings are a special form of building that must have been in perfect keeping with Melnikov's intentions, for nowhere else is an architecture that is basically conceived as emblematic so much at home as here, where sign and function coincide.

There follows a series of garage buildings, starting with two spectacular unrealised monumental projects for Paris and continuing with four garages in Moscow – a task that interested him not only because of the organisation and the expression of movement, for which, each time, he developed new, painstakingly ingenious concepts, but surely also because of the novelty of the whole thing and thus the fact that the project was not encumbered with typological ties.

Subsequently, within a period of only three years, he builds the impressive number of six workers' clubs. Such club houses for workers are one of the important new construction projects during the early years of the Soviet Union – in his memoirs, in 1965, Melnikov calls them the »purest of architectural themes«, which »was assigned (...) the task of satisfying the most profound aspirations of the intellectual life of the individual« and which were therefore themselves to be regarded as »individualistic« objects in the overall scene of the construction of the city. They are assigned a role that can hardly be overestimated in the restructuring or construction of society, and they were destined, in combination with the development of new types of housing and of a genuinely socialistic urban space, actually to shape socialist society. That is why in addition to functional tasks they also have a vital importance as signs.

The club is thus a completely novel building type, formed at the same time as the new social order; in addition to the exhibition buildings it is both the most prominent and the most complex task for Soviet architects, not least because

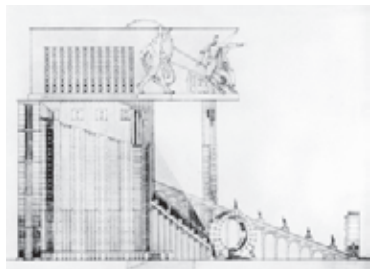
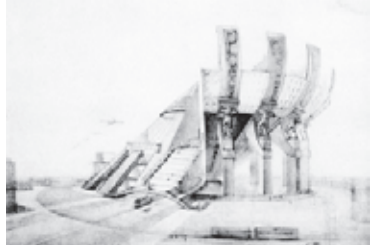


Garage, Paris (P [= project, not realised]), 1925

Bakhmetevsky Garage, Moscow, 1926

Burevestnik Club, Moscow, 1927-29

Svoboda Club, Moscow, 1927-29



Urban development of Arbat Square, Moscow (P), 1931

Palace of Soviets, Moscow (CE [= competition entry]), 1933

Commissariat of Heavy Industry, Moscow (CE), 1934

Housing complex, Moscow (P), 1936

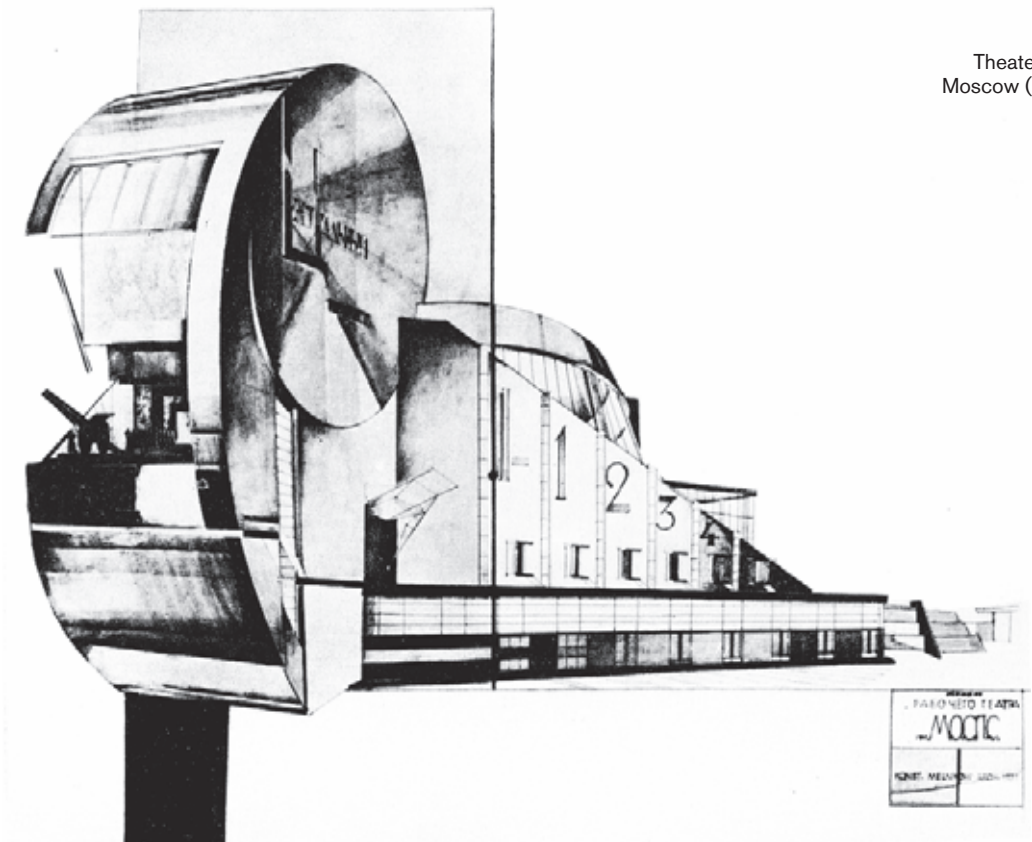
these projects, unlike fantastic large enterprises such as the Palace of Labor, did not have to remain limited to paper only.

During this phase of intensive work and great successes he also tackles the construction of his own home. The end of the decade finds him at the peak of his career, undisputed but not unchallenged. His mostly gigantomaniac competition designs are denied recognition, the large urban development projects he has been working on since the early 1930s remain unrealised, and as intellectual and creative freedom is increasingly restricted by Stalin, his star is on the decline – it virtually plummets. It is true that his projects in the '30s are not free from a certain affinity for the new monumentality of Stalinist architecture concepts and rhetoric, but this must probably be regarded less as obsequiousness than as the attempt to comprehend, to incorporate the new conditions and requirements in a genuinely architectonic form, and perhaps to wrest the architecture from them as it were. His ideas were not picked up until a half-century later, when, in the last decade of the Soviet Union, there was a short revival of an architecture as imaginative as it was fantastic, which is hardly conceivable without the reception of the works and, above all, the unrealised projects of Melnikov.

At first, however, he fell into obscurity. Stalin preferred a different kind of architecture and architects who could be more easily manipulated and did not crave artistic independence as much as did Melnikov. Meanwhile the downfall seems not to have been the direct doing of the dictator, but the result of enemies he made among other architects. Now he paid the price for always insisting on his independence and, in splendid isolation, systematically refusing to belong to any group: left to fend for himself, he was incapable of countering the accusations made against him, especially that of formalism, and was finally excluded from the Union of Architects in 1937, in other words, de facto banned from working.

Melnikov was 47 years old and was forced to make a living as a portrait painter and teacher. At least he was able to go

on living undisturbed in his own house with his family in Moscow, something that could not be taken for granted if we remember the fate of others, for instance Meyerhold or Mandelstam. This forced inner emigration was to continue for almost four decades, during which he kept making unsuccessful efforts to pursue his rehabilitation, while also trying to stay in the public eye by submitting competition entries every now and then. On the occasion of his 75th birthday, in 1965, an exhibition of his works was finally held in Moscow, only to be closed again four days later by order of the authorities – his opponents still had sufficient influence as well as the will to exert it. Two years later the spell was broken: Melnikov was awarded an honorary doctorate and finally, in 1972 two years before his death, he received the Medal for Meritorious Architects of the People of the USSR.



Theater MOSPS, Moscow (CE), 1931





**THE HOUSE** in which he spent the last 45 years of his life is one of the most remarkable buildings left to us by 20th century architecture – and also one of the most surprising and perhaps most enigmatic. Even today, the observer feels astonished, indeed almost a little helpless at the sight of this work, and his reaction is no doubt not much different from that of a visitor at the time when the building was completed. In fact, no amount of familiarity has been able to deprive the house of its radicality, and this radicality is pervasive and intrinsic, and anything but blatant posturing.

Let us get a general idea for a start. The house is located in Moscow, not far from the Arbat, then as now a centre of urban life. It looks quite strange on its parcel of land, an unrelated solitaire in a narrow gap between buildings of an otherwise closed street frontage.

Melnikov creates his structure from two interlocked cylinders of different heights; the one closer to the street has three, the other four storeys. However, the storeys cannot be identified from the exterior: facing the street there is a window element as high as the building; with its flanking pilaster strips that – perhaps not without intention – suggest a Baroque colossal order, combined with the symmetry of the whole, it gives quite a monumental impression, accentuated by the fact that behind the overhigh windows in the upper section one can sense or, when the windows are open or illuminated, actually see a correspondingly overhigh space. This space, at least from the outside, divulges just as little of its typology as the whole structure in front of which we are standing; the window and the height evoke the image of a Baroque ballroom, yet somehow incommensurable: the impression given by the whole refuses to conform. Thus while the upper section is too high, the squat lower part seems too low to be taken for a full-fledged storey. While nothing quite seems to conform on the street side, the other views are even less likely to give a satisfactory picture, or at least one that could be brought into conformity with the familiar. What causes considerable confusion is not only the



← M. A. Ilyin, Melnikov's house viewed from the southeast, 1931. © The Schusev State Museum of Architecture, Moscow, 2015.

View from the northwest, 1985



almost violent affront against urban structures and the disconcerting form of the building, but also the incomprehensible organisation of the interior for which the outside does not provide a clue; as a result, the entire building gives an extremely bewildering impression.

As a matter of fact, the relation of the Melnikov House to its neighbourhood, to the surrounding urban space, cannot be judged without a look at one of the great urbanistic themes of the 1920s and '30s. Lissitzky, in his book *The Reconstruction of Architecture in the Soviet Union*, speaks of the problematic relation of the new buildings to the old city – not in the sense of criticizing the new architecture to be sure, but rather the insufficiency of the city and its structures, felt to be inadequate, mired in the old ways. In other words, it is necessary to create an authentic socialist cityscape. This will be both a tool and an expression of the new society and be significantly different from the traditional city, whose chief characteristic is the closed frontage, the direct expression, according to Lissitzky, of bourgeois-capitalist property conditions.

The problematic relation of the house to the surrounding area points to such contexts: every one of Melnikov's buildings is to be regarded as an experiment in this new field of socialist urban planning. His buildings organise the city as a network of new connections, by means of the new concept of the 'open street' – a buzzword of the times – and are thus definitely not without a relation to the texture of the city. This relation consists of the two sides of the same coin: a programmatic opposition to what currently exists, and a promise of concrete things to come.

The 'differentness' of his buildings was probably one of Melnikov's goals – not only as regards their individual appearance and the way they refused to be typologically defined, but also in their relation to their surroundings and to what those surroundings would lead an observer to expect. The Rusakov Club clearly illustrates this: it is true that reference is made to the orthogonal system of the adjacent

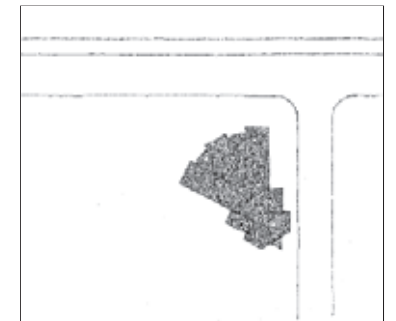
Site plan, 1927

streets, but by explicitly turning away the building's orientation from what the urban context suggests or seems to demand. The curved or, more accurately, the evasé structure gives the impression of being a corner building, but turns away from the very corner on which it is situated and which recommends the choice of the corresponding diagonal for the main axis of the building. Along the smaller street the ground plan does suggest a kind of façade, yet when one examines the building itself, the extremely dynamic, asymmetrical design, revealed as a complicated and paradox conglomerate of components, avoids everything one expects from a façade. Perhaps one can say that Melnikov places his buildings in direct relation to public space, renouncing explicitly a connection to the street organised by means of façades, or any mediation by the street.

The fact that he consistently avoids anything that could be associated with façades characterises Melnikov's work in general. Thus his house too does not permit the use of the term façade. Instead it has a consistent opening toward the street, the large element that extends over the entire height of the house, completely interrupting the continuity of the cylindrical wall – the very opposite of any sort of façade, which even if it is transparent is always identifiable as what is placed in front of something. Here, however, instead of its closure, what we have before us in the caesura of the wall is the consistent opening of the space.

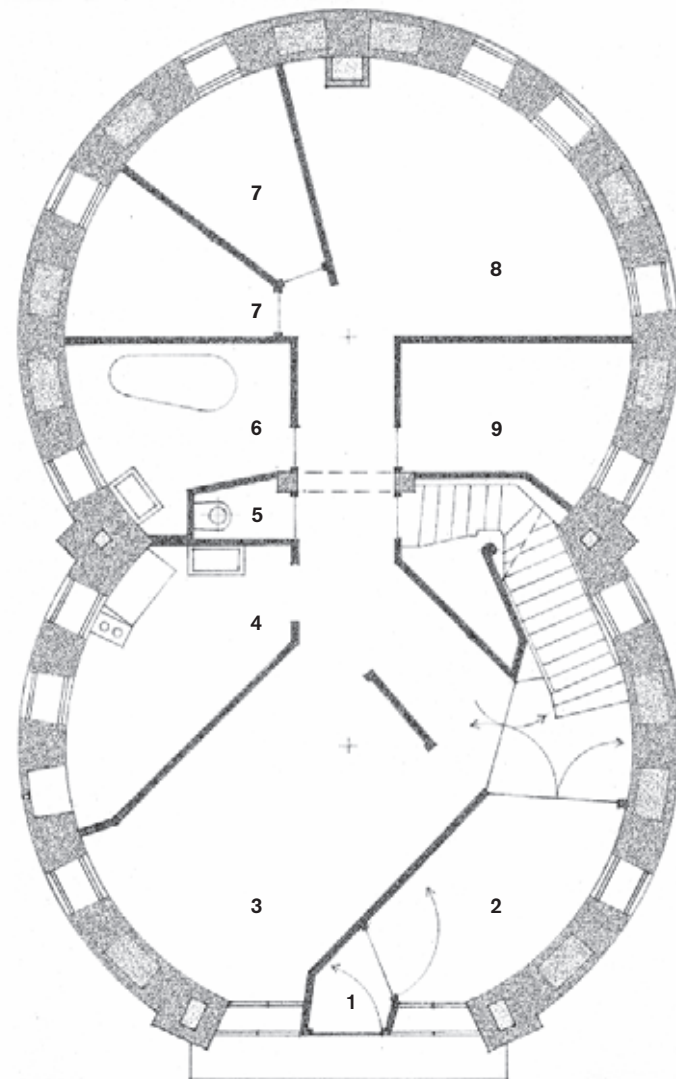
It is due to this opening that the house extends an inviting gesture to the visitor, in distinct contrast to the basically unwelcoming impression so characteristic of cylindrical buildings.

Let us accept this invitation and go inside. Through a narrow porch we enter an anteroom that glaringly deviates not only in its form but also in its orientation from all that the exterior view led us to expect. The main room of the ground floor, the dining room, turns out to be equally remarkable, at least when we examine the ground plan. Its late-19th-century furnishings also surprise us a little when we remember that



Rusakov Club, Moscow, 1927-29





- 1 Entrance
- 2 Vestibule
- 3 Dining room
- 4 Kitchen
- 5 Toilet
- 6 Bathroom
- 7 Children's rooms
- 8 Anna Gavrilovna's room
- 9 Storage

we are in the home of a champion of early 20th century modernism, an architect who like virtually no other epitomises the architecture of revolution, the cult of the new. Here one might be inclined to suspect a programmatic stance, something like a critique of the dogmatism of modernism, or of modernism in general. For Melnikov always refuses to be conveniently classified, and even more to be subsumed – architecture, for him, although linked to what is contemporary, consistently refuses to accept the comfort of anything conventional and marketable, but celebrates an idealistic as well as individualistic concept of beauty – the term ‘beauty’, which we hardly dare to use any more, has for him an importance that cannot be overestimated, and he uses it frequently in his later writings as a legitimation and a goal.

The next room, the kitchen, is again somewhat difficult to understand. Its ground plan is hardly indicative of an architectural concept. The second cylinder contains the bathroom, the two rooms of the children, the room of Anna Gavrilovna, Melnikov's wife, and a storeroom. All this, one must admit, leaves us rather baffled, not only as regards the cut of the rooms, but also the access concept.

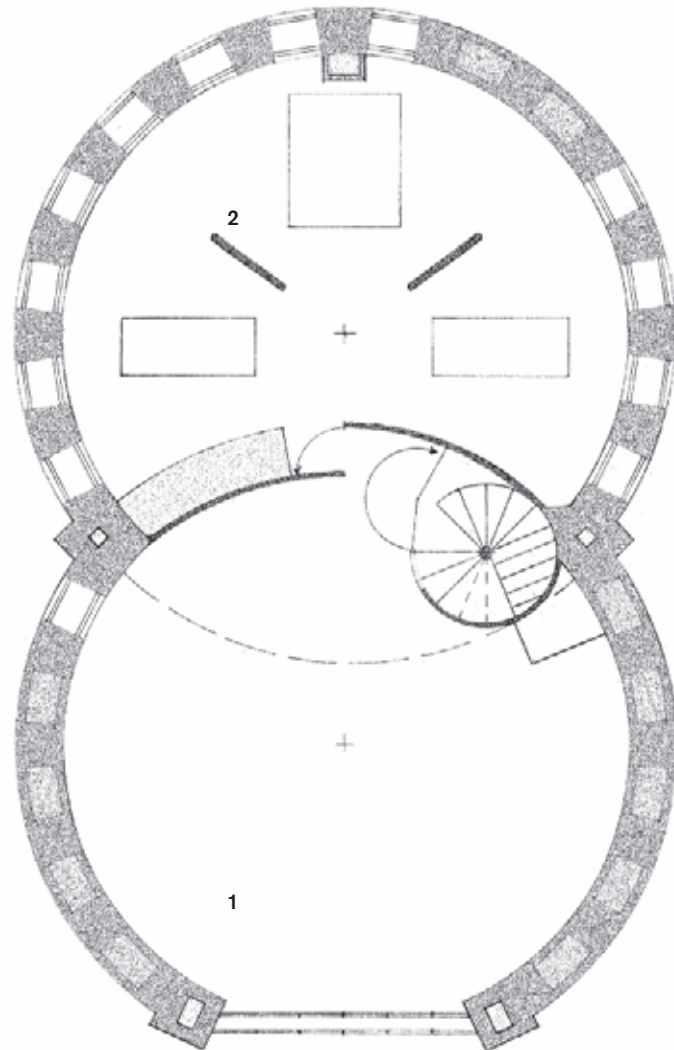
Let us then escape into the upper storeys. Even the staircase we use is not without peculiarities: it is a lopsided, ambiguous structure, apparently giving the impression that its geometry is due to external constraints rather than to autonomy. The straight flight of stairs, twisted below and winding at the top, finally leads to the cylinder of a spiral or, more accurately, a newel staircase, landing us in the living room the very moment we become aware of it.

Up to this point everything has felt narrow, labyrinthine and confined, not at all in keeping with the gesture of the exterior; now, however, the almost forgotten promise of the exterior is fulfilled: we discover a grandiose room, spacious, high, filled with light, and also amazingly habitable – a room in which one is able and willing to dwell. This is also a room of overwhelming sovereignty, without any authoritarian gesture, granting its inhabitants leeway: space as a clearing or



Dining room  
Staircase





1 Living area  
2 Bedroom



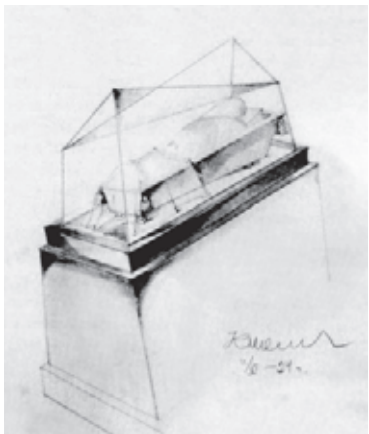
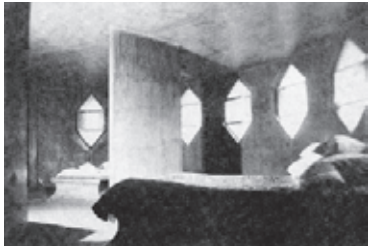
lighting (Lichtung), as Heidegger says in his lecture *Die Kunst und der Raum* (Art and space), that creates free openness for human settling and dwelling.

The bedroom is situated on the same level, in the rear cylinder. It was in this room that the beds of all the family members were located. Though this seems unusual to us, it may have been the custom in Russia; besides, one should not forget that Melnikov had spent his childhood – which according to him was a happy one – in a single room shared by the parents and five children, in the still rural outskirts of Moscow in a building called »the Hay Loft«, of which he later says that looking back on his works, the source of his individuality was clearly visible in the architecture of that building. It is not difficult to imagine, in this long vanished dwelling, the anonymous quality of peasant building traditions whose traces can be found in many places in Melnikov's work and that resonate everywhere in his house.

Living area facing south

Living area facing north

Living area facing east



Certain peculiarities of this family bedroom deserve special mention. Melnikov's conviction that sleep has an importance so far not completely recognised grew into a veritable sleep cult that became quite esoteric. Thus it was imperative that people should sleep in dust-free rooms; accordingly all surfaces in the bedroom were carefully smoothed and polished, and all corners were rounded, which would make dusting simpler. As for the beds, they were pedestal-like objects that give the room the somewhat disturbing character of a burial chamber. Frederick Starr, in the last chapter of his comprehensive and commendable Melnikov biography makes this the starting point of a rather longwinded speculation about death and resurrection motifs that according to him run like a red thread through Melnikov's entire oeuvre – ranging from his design for the Lenin sarcophagus to the garages in which the buses slept the sleep of death by night, only to be awakened refreshed to new life on the following morning. However, Starr does not put it as crudely as it sounds in this abbreviated version.

In the competition for the so-called ›Green City‹, a resort for 100,000 workers not far from Moscow, where the weary industrial worker – whose enthusiasm for the new order might be in danger of losing its great momentum, due to the fact that Stalin had recently ordered an increase in working hours – was to be restored to full productivity in an assembly-line process so to speak, Melnikov planned what he called ›sleep laboratories‹, his own invention, in which the night in particular was to be utilised for the great cause of recreation, and run-down workers were to be treated to sleep therapy sessions. All this can no doubt be seen as related to the mania for organising everything down to the last detail following the Revolution – indeed, there were serious projects to taylorise the entire daily schedule minute by minute, even private life, which was thus to be eliminated.

He planned sleep as a collective arrangement, as he had done in his house, in dormitories of 60 beds each. Everything was to be controlled and regulated »according to

Bedroom, before 1942

Bedroom, oil sketch, 1930s

Lenin's sarcophagus, sketch, 1924

scientific facts«: air pressure, humidity and temperature; moreover, the purified air would be scented with balsamic perfumes and the dormitory would have a background noise of suitable sounds – the rustling of leaves and the pounding of waves, the song of nightingales, also poems specially created for this purpose, and the appropriate music: Melnikov seems to have imagined his therapy as a sort of functionalised synthesis of the arts. Moreover, the beds were to be mechanised and would thus rock the exhausted heroes of labour into a healing collective sleep. An architectural peculiarity of this sleep labs are the floors, which were not only inclined at an angle of 5° – allegedly in order to make pillows superfluous – but were also distinctly cambered across the slope line.

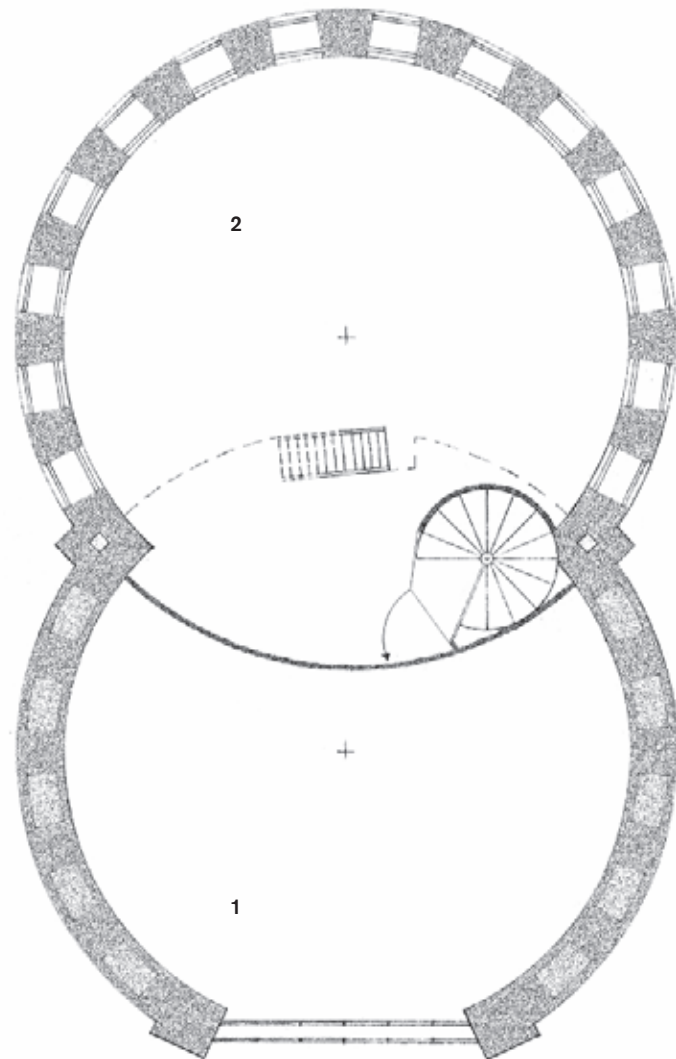
Melnikov imagined that this would be a way of manipulating the psyche. He was fully convinced of his method; on a panel included in his submission to the competition he wrote the admonition: »Cure through sleep and thereby alter the character!«, and added: »Anyone who thinks otherwise is sick.«

To complete the enumeration of his somewhat darker sides, let me mention that in the centre of the ›Green City‹ he conceived an ›Institute for Changing the Form of Man‹, once more his own invention and a truly cultural-revolutionary institution that should actually have sent Stalin into transports of delight, – a behavioural laboratory, a psychosocial rehabilitation camp that may not even have been unkindly meant.

With a faint shudder we leave the Melnikovs' bedroom and go upstairs to explore the topmost floor. Now it is a real spiral staircase that takes us in a rotary movement of 360° into the last room of the house, the studio. This space is basically already familiar to us – the dimensions and the geometrical layout correspond to those of the living room, and the dramaturgy, again close to late Baroque concepts, is also the same: after leaving the staircase cylinder we are standing under a low ceiling that prevents us from seeing the actual



›Green City‹ (CE), general plan, 1930



- 1 Air space  
2 Studio



height of the room, and it is not until a couple of steps later that it all becomes clear. But what a difference! We find ourselves standing in a veritable space of light, whose wall is pierced by countless hexagonal windows (38, by the count of it), windows with an unusual shape we have already encountered occasionally as we walked through the house, but which only show their true essence here, in this apotheosis of light. What is remarkable about these windows is that their openings are not cut out of the surface, in the sense of creating the impression of an interruption of the wall's continuum. Rather, the wall has turned into a net-like structure – which, however, is true only up to a certain point, for the essence of a net lies in the tendential one-dimensionality of its links and in its multilayered structure. Here, however, the

Studio facing north

Studio facing north

Studio facing southwest, 1930s

Melnikov in the studio, ca. 1960