In Moscow, a Battle for a Modernist Landmark

Dmitry Beliakov for The New York Times

The Constructivist architect Konstantin Melnikov's grandchildren are fighting over the fate of his landmark 1929 house in central Moscow.

By CHRISTOPHER MASON
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MOSCOW

A FEW hours after Viktor Melnikov died of cancer at 91 on Feb. 5, his estranged younger daughter and nephew appeared on his doorstep with a retinue of lawyers and bodyguards to try to seize control of his house in the center of this city.

"My father's body was still warm," Ekaterina Karinskaya, Mr. Melnikov's elder daughter, recalled bitterly. Ms. Karinskaya, the executor of her father's estate, refused to surrender the house, and her relatives eventually left, but a mysterious car remained outside for two days, she said. According to Ms. Karinskaya, the three men inside it photographed everyone going in and out of the house,

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Top, World Monuments Fund; above, Harf Zimmerman/World Monuments Fund

Soviet architect Konstantin Melnikov's Moscow house, with rhomboid-shaped windows.

but would not disclose who had hired them.

Acrimonious family conflicts are a way of life for the Melnikovs, who have spent the past 20 years embroiled in recriminations and lawsuits over the house in question, the only private one built in the center of Moscow during the Soviet period and an internationally acclaimed Constructivist masterpiece by Mr. Melnikov's father, the Soviet architect and painter Konstantin Melnikov.

According to Barry Bergdoll, a professor of modern architectural history at Columbia University and the recently appointed chief curator of architecture and design at the Museum of Modern Art, the house, finished in 1929, is worth fighting over.

It "is one of the most important house designs of 1920's modernism," he said. "The house is of global significance."

John Stubbs, the vice president for field projects at the World Monuments Fund, likens it to Sir John Soane's house museum in London and Frank Lloyd Wright's Taliesin West, calling it "a rare and telling survivor of the extraordinary story of the Russian artistic avant-garde."

Viktor Melnikov's will, which has not yet been probated (it was scheduled for Aug. 5, six months after his death) bequeaths his half-share of the house to the Russian state on the condition that it be preserved as a museum honoring his father. It has been held up because the government has not decided whether to accept the bequest.

Two days after Mr. Melnikov's death, Ms. Karinskaya was shocked to discover that her first cousin, Alexei Ilganaev, who had inherited the other half-share, had sold it in November to Sergey Gordeev, a 33-year-old real estate developer-turned-senator with his own plans for the property.

"Alexei sold it without consulting my father, who was the only person living in the house," Ms. Karinskaya said.

Now, all involved await word from the Ministry of Culture and the agency in charge of

administering national property about what will ultimately become of this striking and historic house that occupies prime real estate near Moscow's old Arbat pedestrian street.

THE grim soap opera of litigation began in 1988, when Viktor Melnikov's sister, Lyudmila, demanded that it be subdivided to allow her to move in. He refused and she initiated a lawsuit that dragged on for eight years. A Moscow court awarded her a half-ownership of the house, but not the right to inhabit it. And last year, in a lawsuit initiated by Mr. Melnikov, in a King Lear-like twist, a Moscow judge ruled that his younger daughter, Yelena Melnikova, had deceived her blind father into signing a document giving her ownership of his share of the building. She appealed and lost, but the squabbles continue. Ms. Melnikova is currently disputing the accounting methods used to calculate the compensation that she and her sister are entitled to receive from their father's estate.

During his lifetime, Viktor Melnikov adamantly refused to sell any of his father's paintings, sketches or architectural drawings, a legacy worth tens of millions of dollars, opting for a life of poverty in order to preserve the house exactly as it was at the time of his father's death in 1974.

According to Clementine Cecil, a British-born founder and trustee of the Moscow Architecture Preservation Society who has been a tireless crusader for the house, Mr. Melnikov spent virtually no money on food, surviving on tea and meager servings of vegetables. "Cockroaches scurried about the kitchen and over the paintings," she recalled.

The elder Melnikov's eyeglasses still lie where he left them, by his drawing desk. Earlier this summer, Ms. Karinskaya led this visitor up a curved stairway late one night to her father's huge, airy painting studio on the top floor. Clearly impatient with her guest, who struggled to keep up in the mandatory house-tour slippers that made the narrow stairs seem especially treacherous, she pointed out the building's unique structure.

The three-story, plaster-sheathed house is composed of two interlocking cylindrical towers. The taller, to the rear, is honeycombed with rhomboid-shaped windows that cast shifting patterns of light by day. In the front of the house, a 17-foot-tall expanse of glass is topped with a sign proclaiming the name of its creator: Konstantin Melnikov, Architect. (It was a bold calling card during a Soviet regime that prized uniformity; after the house was completed, Stalin denounced Melnikov, who was never permitted to build again.)

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Recently, the house has begun to show signs of serious physical neglect. “The bathroom floor has completely collapsed,” said David Sarkisyan, the director of the Shchusev State Museum of Architecture, who has been involved with efforts to preserve it for the past six years, and who joined Ms. Karinskaya’s midnight tour. In the room where Viktor Melnikov slept, Mr. Sarkisyan pointed to a four-foot chunk of plaster that had fallen from the ceiling, revealing the building’s waffle-like construction. The frame of the main window, he said, has ruptured under the weight of the glass, and could easily collapse, “which would be disastrous,” he said.

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Harf Zimmerman/World Monuments Fund

Despite the house’s historical significance, the city has permitted the construction of high-rise condominiums nearby with underground parking garages, which has affected the stability of the site, according to Natalia Dushkina, a professor at the Moscow Institute of Architecture, who organized a conference on the preservation of 20th-century Russian architecture there in April. “The soil structure has changed dramatically over the past few years,” she said. “The additional water pressure has flooded the whole site, and there is damp and fungus in the basement.” Inept conservation work carried out by the city in the 1990’s has contributed to the building’s decline, she added.

The interiors still look much the same as they did when he died in 1974. Above, a bedroom.

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Dmitry Beliakov for The New York Times

there is unmistakable evidence of deterioration: in the bathroom the floorboards have begun to rot.

Observers at the World Monuments Fund, which placed the building on its 2006 Watch List of 100 most endangered sites, have noted with concern that the 8,600-square-foot site, at 10 Krivoarbatsky Lane, is valued at more than $40 million, making it a tempting target for developers. (Since 1992, more than 400 of Moscow's historic buildings have been destroyed under the watch of mayor Yuri Luzhkov, who has expressed contempt for "idiots for whom the preservation of old bricks is an aim in itself." Critics suspect a conflict of interest: Mr. Luzhkov's wife, Yelena Baturina, owns one of the city's largest construction companies, Inteko, estimated to be worth more than $1 billion.)

Although Mr. Gordeev has said from the start that he is interested in turning the house into a museum, preservationists have been worried about what the former developer's true intentions might be — particularly, according to Ms. Karinskaya, because he initially spoke of converting the house into a private museum that he would personally fund, rather than the state-run operation Viktor Melnikov's will called for. "After my father died Mr. Gordeev came to see me, to find out how much I cost," Ms. Karinskaya said. "When he understood that I was priceless he left very unsatisfied."

Some of the preservationists' skepticism may stem from Mr. Gordeev's association with a controversial government official who assisted him in the acquisition: Iosif Kobzon, a pop crooner who heads the Parliament's culture committee and is often described as Russia's Frank Sinatra — a reference not only to his singing voice but to his alleged connections with organized crime, according to The Moscow Times. Mr. Gordeev acknowledged that Mr. Kobzon had been helpful in an official capacity. "I sent him a letter, and he helped organize meetings with Melnikov's son and granddaughter," he said in a telephone interview, referring to Viktor Melnikov and and his daughter Ekaterina.

And Mr. Gordeev's motives have also been called into question because of his history with Rosbuilding, a development company of which he was a founder. Ivan Glukhov, chief of Moscow's main investigation agency, has blamed the company for a rash of hostile property takeovers, in which seizures are carried out according to laws, but enforced through intimidation and blackmail of shareholders. (In an official Kremlin news

broadcast on April 6, Mr. Glukhov claimed that Rosbuilding had "used loopholes in the legislation to grab several enterprises on the territory of Moscow.") Mr. Gordeev, who acknowledged that "there were some scandals" associated with the company, said he has not been involved with it for four years. And in a recent telephone interview, he seemed to have changed his tune about his hopes for the house's future, speaking eloquently of the need to make it a federally run museum.

"Melnikov is the most important modern architect — and the most interesting — in our history," he said, going on to wax poetic about the house. "With the diamond-shaped windows he explored the aperture between light and darkness. To experience sunrise and sunset in this house is very dramatic. Beautiful. Fantastic."

"The most important thing is to start the process of creating a European-standard contemporary house museum," he continued. To that end, he said, he is prepared to donate his financial interest in the house to the state. "I sent the government a letter, offering to help in the creation of a federal-level museum," he added. "If the government doesn't have enough money to fund this museum I can arrange support." In buying his half-share of the house, Mr. Gordeev said, he had merely intended "to stop the silliness between the relatives and all the conflict."

So far, at least, the acquisition appears to have had the opposite effect. "If Katya, the executor, will be more collaborative and less suspicious," he said, referring to Ms. Karinskaya, "I think the project will go well." Asked whether she felt she could trust Mr. Gordeev, now that his goals for the house appear to be in tune with her own, Ms. Karinskaya took a deep breath.

"I prefer not to answer this question," she said.

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