

Moscow – Mel'nikov
The Architecture and Urban Planning
of Konstantin Mel'nikov 1921–1937

16th February 2006 to 13th April 2006

Curators: Otakar Máčel (Delft), Maurizio Meriggi (Milan)
Dietrich Schmidt (Stuttgart)

Press tour: Wednesday, 15th February 2006, 10.30 am

Opening: Wednesday, 15th February 2006, 6.30 pm

Exhibition venue:

Wiener Städtische Allgemeine Versicherung AG

Ringturm Exhibition Centre

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Opening hours:

Monday to Friday: 9.00 am – 6.00 pm; admission free
(closed on public holidays)

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The Russian Revolution of October 1917 was followed by a phase of radical artistic and cultural activity that constitutes one of the most interesting periods in 20th-century architecture. Konstantin Mel'nikov made a significant contribution to this exciting period. From deceptively simple exhibition pavilions via his own highly unusual house in the form of a double cylinder to major urban planning projects, his striking architecture is among the most creative of all architectural achievements. ARCHITECTURE IN THE RINGTUM presents a survey of Mel'nikov's key works in the form of models, photographs and plans.

In the 1920s, **Konstantin Stepanovich Mel'nikov** (Moscow 1890 – Moscow 1974), one of the leading exponents of the Russian avant-garde, developed a revolutionary architectural vision that amounted to nothing less than a new architectonic aesthetic. In just 20 years he created an extraordinary body of outstanding buildings and designs. His work is frequently reminiscent of abstract sculptures rather than functional buildings.

By the age of 13, Mel'nikov was working in the office of renowned heating engineer Vladimir Chaplin. Chaplin was quick to recognise Mel'nikov's talent and sent him to the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture. Mel'nikov initially studied painting and subsequently switched to architecture. He finished his studies in 1917 and was appointed to the Moscow Urban Planning Department where he spent three years working on the plans for a "New Moscow" under the supervision of Sholtovsky and Shchusev.

Soon after, Mel'nikov took up a teaching post at VkhUTEMAS (the state art and technical college that was at that time championing the new style of Soviet architecture) in Moscow. He drew attention to himself as an architect with competition designs that were extremely original in their treatment of form and space. His experimentation with geometrical shapes (triangles, trapezia, pyramids, cylinders etc. whose use always derived from an analysis of function) and the dynamic appearance of his buildings soon became his trademarks.

He produced designs for **Workers' Homes on Serpuchov Street** (1922–23), the **Palace of Labour** (1923) and the **Moscow Headquarters of "Leningrad Pravda"** (1924). His breakthrough came with the angular **Wooden Pavilion for the Makhorka Tobacco Company** (1924 and 1926) that he designed for the first All-Russian Agricultural and Craft Exhibition held in the **New Sukharev Market** in Moscow (which he also designed). Due, on the one hand, to a shortage of resources and, on the other, to its ease of construction, Mel'nikov opted for an unconventional timber-framed structure that is reminiscent of Russia's simple traditional wooden buildings.

In 1925 he attracted international attention with his **Soviet Pavilion** for the **Paris Exhibition of Decorative Arts**. This expressive glass and timber building was the sensation of the exhibition. Its glass exterior (supported by a wooden strut and plank framework) lent the pavilion an unusual degree of lightness and transparency. Mel'nikov had already demonstrated with his Makhorka Pavilion that he was able to build economically and this was one of the main reasons that his design was selected. The Soviet Pavilion was the only building he realised outside the Soviet Union.

During his stay in Paris, Mel'nikov was commissioned by the city authorities to design a **Car Park for 1000 Cars**, which did not, however, progress beyond the project

stage. Here Mel'nikov made an early attempt to implement his ideas for a vertical organisation of the city. His plan for the cars to be parked one above the other – on a bridge of the Seine moreover – was astonishingly new. The car park, which was enormous by the standards of the day, was raised above the ground on pillars in order to keep the space underneath free. Following his return to the Soviet Union he was commissioned to design another car park which became his first outstanding architectural work.

Mel'nikov went on to design four car parks between 1926 and 1936: the **Bakhmetevsky**, the **Novoriazansky**, the **Intourist** and the **Gosplan**. Between 1927 and 1930 he worked on projects for workers' clubs for a variety of workers' unions in Moscow. Six of these were realised: the **Rusakov**, the "**Kauchuk**", the "**Frunze**", the "**Burevestnik**" ("**Albatross**"), the **Pravda** and the **Gorky**. Along with his own **House and Studio in Moscow** (consisting of the two famous cylindrical towers pierced by six-sided windows), these are the master architect's best-known works.

Mel'nikov produced highly convincing work in all spheres of architectural practice from urban planning to monument design. He entered many major architectural competitions including the **Columbus Memorial in Santo Domingo** (1929), the **Plan for a "Green City"** (1929), the **MOSPS Theatre** (Moscow Council of Trade Unions, 1931–32), **Arbat Square** (1931) and the **Soviet Palace** (1931–33). Competitions gave him an opportunity to demonstrate his skill in tackling planning problems of a new scale that explored the issue of monumentality.

In 1933 he designed the Architectural Exhibition of the Soviet Union at the Milan Triennale and was also placed in charge of **Studio No. 7 of the Moscow Soviet (Mossoviet)**. All the studios were headed by acclaimed figures of Soviet architecture – such as Ivan Sholtovsky, Aleksei Shchusev and Ilya Golosov – and were involved with the replanning of Moscow. Here (between 1933 and 1936) Mel'nikov designed the **Intourist and Gosplan Car Parks**, the **Kotelnichesky and Goncharny Embankment Development** in Moscow, the **Residential Complex for Izvestia Workers** and the **Ministry of Heavy Industry**.

The golden age of the Soviet avant-garde came to an end in the 1930s. Mel'nikov came in for increasing criticism as a "formalist", a state of affairs that reached its climax in 1937. It initially seems ironic that the modernist Mel'nikov, who built more than anyone else in Moscow in the 1920s, should be vehemently attacked. One of his most spectacular projects, the Leningrad Pravda tower, explains this retrospectively. The structure's rotating storeys exceeded the technological means of the Soviet Union of that time by far.

Mel'nikov was denounced as an individualist whose work lacked practical relevance and he was stripped of his professional title. He withdrew into his private life and devoted himself to painting. In the 1950s and 1960s he attempted – in vain – to take up his former career once more, entering a number of competitions (**USSR Pantheon**, 1955; **USSR Pavilion for the New York World's Fair**, 1962, **Children's Cinema** on Arbat Street, Moscow, 1960).

When in the mid-1960s a revival of interest in the Soviet avant-garde led to the first ever publication of his architectural designs ("Architect Konstantin Mel'nikov" by Yuri Gerchuk in "ArchSSSR, 1966, No. 8"), interest in his buildings and ideas grew. A

reappraisal of his work followed in the 1980s and his architecture finally achieved the international recognition it deserved.

The exhibition: approximately 30 models provide an insight into the design process behind Konstantin Mel'nikov's key buildings and shed light on the complex spatial ideas of this unusual architect. Illustrations and plans bring to life the euphoria and optimism of Mel'nikov and his generation of young architects in post-revolutionary Moscow.

The exhibition is the result of a collaboration between the Faculty of Architecture of Politecnico di Milano Technical University, the Faculty of Architecture of Delft University of Technology and the Institutes of Architectural History and Art and Design of the University of Stuttgart.

Catalogue (in English): Konstantin S. Mel'nikov and the Construction of Moscow. Edited by Mario Fosso, Otakar Máčel, Maurizio Meriggi. Over 300 pages with numerous black and white illustrations. Skira, Milan 2000. Price: 50 euros.

Press releases and photographs relating to the ARCHITECTURE IN THE RINGTURM series of exhibitions can be found at <http://www.wienerstaedtische.at> in the "Arts & Culture" section.