

Outstanding Works of the Soviet Architectural Avant-garde as Joint Heritage: Past, Present, Future

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As you know, the heroic period of the Soviet architectural avant-garde did not last long, only about 10 years – from the 1920s to the 1930s. Its innovative breakthrough put Russian architecture in the front row of world architecture. However, after the contest for the Palace of Soviets in 1934, this page of our history was turned over and condemned. Nevertheless, this period left us a unique cultural heritage that for all these 80 years has retained its importance and attractiveness and has remained a source of inspiration for architects from all over the world. Outstanding examples are objects of pilgrimage, which has not exhausted, in spite of barbaric neglect or monstrous exploitation. The hopes of the world for the cultural breakthrough of Soviet Russia were so great that the masters of the modern movement from the West took part in it. They won contests that became classics of the modern movement and built projects and complexes based on their designs whose scale surpassed the experience of these masters so far. In the anthologies on modern architecture, these works played a huge role for the architecture of the USSR, and in the oeuvre of the masters themselves, but after the triumph of having won the contest their fate was tragic. After the alterations, the creators refused their authorship and their Soviet co-authors tried to fight for the preservation of these remarkable sites. Nevertheless, only during the years of perestroika in 1987–1989 did they gain protection status, albeit the lowest level, i.e. regional. Despite the generally recognised value of these sites, they continue to be threatened by further changes. This concerns buildings of Russian and Western European origin – Centrosoyuz by Le Corbusier and Colley, the Red Banner by E. Mendelsohn

and a group of Soviet engineers, Sotsgorod Magnitigorsk in the Urals by E. May and the Bauhaus group, and the Alvar Aalto Library in Vyborg, although the latter has had a happy ending and was also very instructive for the history of joint restoration.

House of Centrosoyuz

In 1928, the project by Le Corbusier and Colley won the competition. Construction began in 1931 and the site was completed in 1936–37. This first large public building by Le Corbusier embodied the famous five principles of modern architecture. By winning the competition, Le Corbusier paved the way for a new direction in Russia. One of the leaders of Constructivism, A. Vesnin, compared it with the Assumption Cathedral at the Kremlin. In addition to innovative compositional techniques, a unique design solution, materials, and the original ventilation system “mure neutralizante” were used in the project. The building underwent significant changes, but nevertheless preserved the components of outstanding universal value.

“Despite the deviations from the initial interior design, it can be argued that the house Narkomlegprom, in which Rosstat is now located, remains faithful to Le Corbusier’s architectural plan: the layout of internal directional routes, the interpretation of the exterior volumes of the building correspond to his plan,” writes Jean-Louis Cohen.¹

In the 1970s, the building was reconstructed and the first floor was rebuilt. In 1987, it was declared a monument of

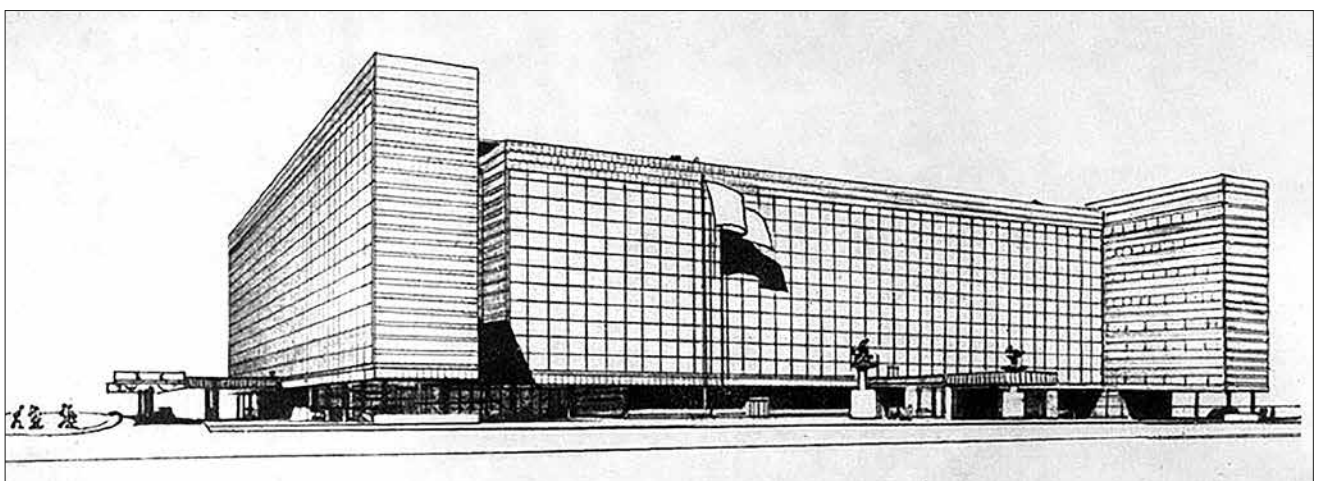


Fig. 1: Moscow, House Centrosoyuz, 1928–1936, architects Le Corbusier, N. Kolley, perspective design, elevation of Myasnitskaya Street (<http://corbusier.totalarch.com/centrosoyuz>)



Fig. 2: Moscow, House Centrosoyuz, contemporary views (author's archive)



Fig. 3: Moscow, House Centrosoyuz, interior views after restoration (<https://www.m24.ru/galleries/arhitektura/01022016/4644>, <https://07122.livejournal.com/3467233.html>, author's archive)



Fig. 4: The ramp (<https://07122.livejournal.com/3467233.html>)



Fig. 5: The cover of a magazine of the 1920s with images of the competition winner (author's archive)



Fig. 6: “Red Banner” power station, 1925–1936, architects E. Mendelsohn, I. Pretro, design by E. Mendelsohn, 1925 (<https://ru-sovarch.livejournal.com/506217.html>)

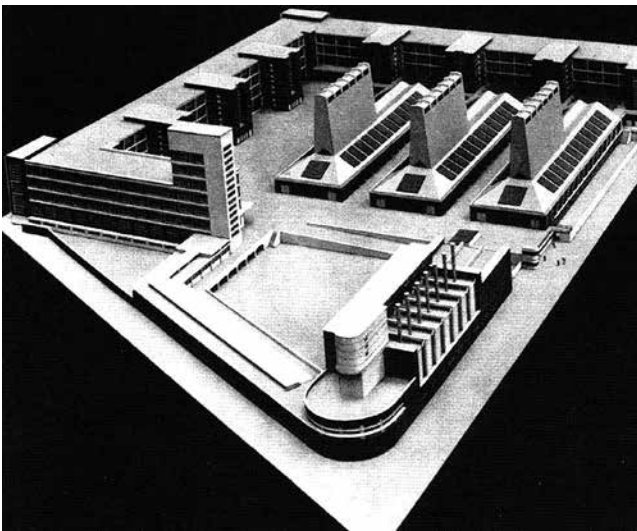


Fig. 7: Model of the plant complex, 1926 (author's archive)



Fig. 8: View of the plant with newly erected building next door (author's archive)

regional importance. In 2006, at the international conference in Moscow “20th Century, Preservation of Cultural Heritage”, with the participation of the executive representatives of UNESCO, ICOMOS, DOCOMOMO, and UIA, a declaration was adopted that recommended to include the Centrosoyuz in the UNESCO World Heritage List. In 2016, 17 Le Corbusier buildings from seven countries were included on the World Heritage List – except the Centrosoyuz in Russia, although the Le Corbusier Foundation had not ruled out this opportunity. The building remains an icon of 20th century architecture. This was once again shown at the anniversary of the Le Corbusier in 2012, but it deserves world recognition and protection. To some extent, as an act of repentance towards the great architect the Moscow authorities in 2015 erected a monument in front of his work. In my opinion, this building meets the following criteria for outstanding universal value: (i) (masterpiece), (ii) (impact on the development of architecture), (iii), (iv), (vi). Unfortunately, questions remain regarding the preservation of the building's authenticity and integrity.

The “Red Banner” Factory in St. Petersburg

A monument to E. Mendelsohn is promised to be put before another icon of avant-garde architecture of the 20th century – a complex of the factory “Red Banner” in St. Petersburg, 1927–1937, together with I. Pretro. The plant's power plant or its power unit received a regional level of protection in 1988; only it was built according to Mendelsohn's project in 1925–1926. The remaining complex of factory facilities was completed in 1926–1928 and 1934–1937 on the basis of a modified project (architect I. Pretro, S. Ovsyannikov, engineer E. Tretyakov). The ensemble's appearance is like a metaphor – a “ship” advancing the entire production. “The production workshops of the factory and the building of the CHP (Central Heating Power) form a single architectural composition known throughout the world. The grandiose of the CHP strikes with its power and colossal scale. The ensemble influenced the work of the Leningrad architects of the 1920s–1930s, who called it ‘a classic example of a new architecture’.”²

Currently, the terrain of the ensemble is divided into two parts between two developers operating independently of each other, despite all requests for a review of the decision to build and adjust the project. Since spring 2016, a multi-family residential complex under the name “Mendelsohn” is under construction, significantly exceeding the historic dominant of the ensemble.



Fig. 9: Interior views of the CP block (<https://ru-sovarch.livejournal.com/506217.html>)



Fig. 10: General view before the new construction (photo Юрий Молотковец Игорь Яковлев Михаил Макшанов Иван Борисов архив ЦГАНТД. Силовая подстанция <https://0i1.livejournal.com/7732.html>)

The Socialist City of Magnitogorsk

In June 1930, the first house of Quarter No. 1 of the socialist city of Magnitogorsk was laid (architect S. Chernyshev, E. May, M. Stam, W. Schütte, etc.), which is a unique example of an actually realised urban development of 1930–1933 by a group of German and Dutch architects under the leadership of Ernst May, with the participation of the Soviet architect



Fig. 11: Sozgorod, Kvartal № 1, Magnitogorsk, 1929–1933, architects E. May, S. Chernyshev, M. Stam, I. Ingeman, M. Schutte, design layout of Magnitogorsk 1930, general plan published in S. Khan Magomedov’s book “Architecture of the Soviet Avant-garde”, vol. 2: “Social issues”.

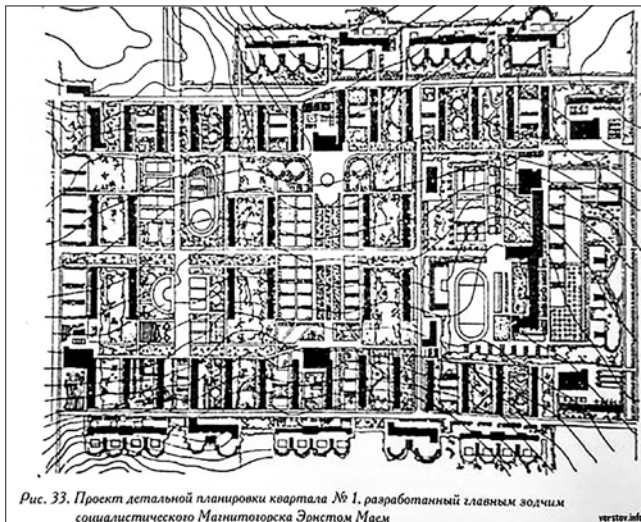


Fig. 13: General plan for Kvartal № 1 of the “social city” Magnitogorsk, E. May team with S. Chernyshev (design of 12 buildings), 1930–1931 (<https://www.verstov.info/news/culture/22757-socgorod-voosstanovit-on-zhe-pamyatnik-zhiteley-levoberezhya-budet-ohranyat-yunesko.html>)

Sergey Chernyshev. The general plan of Magnitogorsk and the layout of the quarter reflects the achievements of the German urban planning of the time (“Frankfurt School”) and the search for the spatial organisation of a new socialist city (“Sotsgoroda”).

This was preceded by public discussions about the socialist settlement and contests in which the utopian principles of Sotsgorod were developed in many ways. Today



Fig. 12: Sozgorod, Tchaikovsky Street (<https://ru-sovarch.livejournal.com/678699.html>)



Fig. 14: Aerial view of the present day situation (<https://www.verstov.info/news/culture/22757-socgorod-voosstanovit-on-zhe-pamyatnik-zhiteley-levoberezhya-budet-ohranyat-yunesko.html>)



Fig. 15: Aerial view, photo of the 1930s (<https://www.verstov.info/news/culture/22757-socgorod-voosstanovit-on-zhe-pamyatnik-zhiteley-levoberezhya-budet-ohranyat-yunesko.html>)



Fig. 16: Design projects for the reconstruction of the historical environment of the 1930s, 2012 (www.verstov.info)



Fig. 17: Present-day situation
(www.verstov.info)



Fig. 18: Present-day situation
(<https://ru-sovarch.livejournal.com/678699.html>)



Fig. 20: Library in Vyborg, 1927–1937, architect A. Aalto, general view of the library after restoration, 2014 (<https://ru.wikipedia.org>)

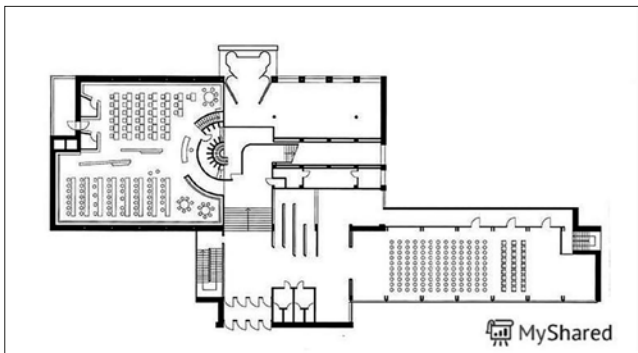


Fig. 21: Plan of the ground floor (© My Shared)

Quarter 1 is the historical part of the city. Its town-planning concept, types of residential buildings, school and kindergartens, organisation and gardening of the spaces between the houses are all material evidence of the search for an ideal city under the real conditions of Russia's first five-year plan.

“Presently, these small fragments of social utopia, realised in stone, are not only on the periphery of the urban space, but also on the periphery of the activities of state protection divisions, surviving in the absence of investment in repairs, restoration, reconstruction, popularization. The historical appearance of many residential and public buildings is irreparably distorted, not only individual buildings are lost, but also the planning structure and, as a whole, the spatial environment reflecting the architectural and town-planning idea of the turn of the 1920s–1930s. Up to the complete destruction that threatens the neighborhood and, probably, in the near future we will be called a ‘lost monument’”, writes E. V. Konyshcheva.³

On the state security there is only one historic house listed, since it was occupied by the artist A. Soloviev. The city authorities decided to restore the quarter in 2018. On 20 February 2013, a petition was sent by German specialists, including Jörg Haspel, to the authorities protesting against the sale of plots in the Quarter.

The Alvar Aalto Library in Vyborg

The construction of the A. Aalto library in Vyborg started in 1927 and was completed in 1935 (coincidentally at the same time as the building of the Centrosoyuz). From 1940 to 1961, the building went through a difficult phase, but the story had a happy ending. From 1994 to 2010 the international project “Integrated scientific restoration of the building of the Vyborg Library A. Aalto” was funded on an equal footing, both from the Russian side and from international sources. In November 2013, the restored library was inaugurated and its restoration was a pilot project for the restoration and conservation of Modernism, implemented in cooperation with the Finnish Committee for Restoration and with ICOMOS. The status of protection is of federal significance registered in 1995.



Fig. 22: Alvar Alto Library, Staircase



Fig. 23: View of the roof
(Google Алвар Аалто. Библиотека в Выборге)



Fig. 24: General view (Google Алвар Аалто. Библиотека в Выборге)



Fig. 25: Sketch of the library, A. Aalto, 1920s (<http://aalto.vbgcity.ru/node/210>)

With these examples, I presented four icons of the architecture of the 20th century, whose outstanding universal value is universally recognised and in accordance with the criteria of ICOMOS. They have in common a similar creation time, a difficult historical destiny, their location is in Russia, they all had an exceptional influence on the development of architecture in the 20th century throughout the world,

and especially their architects jointly created these works. They were part of the fate of Soviet Russia, which was the site of social experiments traumatic for cultural heritage, in that they survived the rise of revolutionary internationalism and the neglect of barbarous obscurantism. Today, they exist in our and the world cultural space, remain to be objects of cultural pilgrimage, and a source of creative

inspiration for future designs. They are also united by the fact that none of them are included in the UNESCO World Heritage List, although this status could protect them at the national level from distortions and maybe loss. Unfortunately, preventive measures – warning letters, inclusion in the list of “heritage under threat”, the opinion of the international community – cannot effectively protect against ignorance and commercial aggression. Inclusion in the UNESCO List, albeit conditionally, with the state having the responsibility for preserving the “best of the best” of human civilization can prevent the threat of extinction. And although the experience of saving the Aalto library today is an exception, it can serve as a real example of successfully combining national and international efforts of society and authorities not only in preserving but also in honouring a cultural heritage site of Finland, Russia, Europe, and the rest of the world.

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¹ COHEN, Le Corbusier, 1992.

² М. С. ШТИГЛИЦ, В. И. ЛЕНИНА. М. А. ГОРДЕЕВА, Б. М. КИРИКОВ. ПАМЯТНИКИ ПРОМЫШЛЕННОЙ АРХИТЕКТУРЫ САНКТ-ПЕТЕРБУРГА. Изд. «БЕЛОЕ И ЧЕРНОЕ». СПБ, 2005г. С. 122–123.

³ E. V. KONYSHEVA, *Urals “Socialist Cities” as a Mirror of Soviet Urban Construction of the Epoch of the “Great Break”*, Revolution and Heritage/Heritage and Revolution, St. Petersburg 2017.