

Konstantin Stepanovich Melnikov: An Original Creator in Isolation.

The post-revolutionary period in Russia could be, probably, considered one of the most important times in the architectural history of the country. It was the time of complete reconstruction of society. The revolutionary ideologists saw architecture as a tool for providing a new physical environment for a new way of life, and architects took advantage of these social challenges to create buildings and typologies the world had never seen before. The revolutionary architects, like Moisei Ginzburg, Ivan Leonidov, the Golosovs, and the Vesnins occupy a high pedestal of modern architecture as a whole.

Prominent among these is Konstantin Stepanovich Melnikov. An architect, whose career began in 1937 and ended in 1937 (precisely the dates of the rise and fall of the revolutionary architecture) was the most active figure of the Soviet architecture, and nevertheless far from typical. He, unlike many of his colleagues, had no interest in developing typological approach in his work which might distinguish its identity.

Melnikov was a self-confident creator and his achievements were unique, but his career was clouded by conflict.

He was the only Soviet architect, who dared (in 1927) to build a private house for himself of a unique design in the heart of Moscow, when all other Soviet architects were occupied with designing communal housing. He maintained his distance from many prominent figures of art and architecture, which was often taken for haughtiness. His buildings were considered to be the symbols of the era and the nation. He was selected by the jury of the 1933 Milan Triennale as one

of twelve great architects of his time, and was the only Soviet architect given his own section at the landmark Machine Age Exposition of 1927 in New York.

Yet, of his more than eighty projects, only twenty were built. His last building was finished when he turned forty-five. From being the representative of the Soviet avant-garde architecture to the entire world Melnikov went into sudden eclipse, and was excommunicated from the profession by his colleagues within mere ten years.

Early years. Professional development.

Konstantin Stepanovich Melnikov was born on August 3rd, 1890 in the Petrovsko-Razumovskoe – a district in the outskirts of Moscow. His parents were peasants from a Moscow province.

Konstantin demonstrated artistic inclinations at a very young age. He would often build geometric forms out of clay, while playing in front of his house, and draw an alley leading to a house, with a red pencil – the only one available to him. He attended a parish school, and after graduation was taken by the icon painter Prohorov in his workshop as an apprentice. He soon dropped the occupation and returned home. By a fluke, young Melnikov was introduced to a prominent civil engineer Chaplin, running a large office “Zaleskiy and Chaplin,” and taken in as an apprentice. From that moment the destinies of these two people were inextricably linked: Chaplin became Melnikov’s mentor. Having seen the boy’s early drawings, Chaplin decided to prepare him for an artistic higher education. He hired a private tutor to prepare Melnikov for the entrance exams in the Academy of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture. In the autumn of 1905 Melnikov brilliantly passed the entrance exams in the Academy, and enrolled in the general department. Konstantin was able to graduate from the general department and then successfully complete the two professional schools: first the school of painting and then school of architecture. It was in the year 1917, and in 1925, when by Melnikov’s project the Russian

pavilion at the Paris exhibition was being built, Chaplin wrote in his letter to Melnikov: “I am happy, that I have been able to discern a divine spark in this slim boy”.

Melnikov had devoted twelve years of his life to the education in the academy. Crucial to understanding a Melnikov’s individual style is an appreciation that he had been a very successful artist and painter while at the Academy. His achievements were so high, that he had been accepted from the general department to the school of painting without examinations. Khan-Magomedov, a Melnikov’s biographer (and a graduate of the same architectural school) believes that Melnikov had evolved as a creative and artistic personality already after the school of painting. He had developed skills that only a few architects of his generation could boast, and preempted this very important stage of his professional development (architectural education) while looking at the architectural profession “from the outside,” not being immersed in the stereotypes of academism characteristic of the architectural education at that time.

Up to 1920 Melnikov’s projects were in the neoclassic style – the main line promoted in his architectural school. Then he quit all the classical and neo-academic tendencies and started looking for his own architectural approach. The early 20’s was a period of intensive search for a new architecture across the world, and especially in Soviet Russia, where many architects not only sought alternatives for their academic heritage, but were also faced with absolutely new social requirements. These totally new conditions formed a fertile ground for growth of a unique Soviet architecture.

The reforms of the architectural education in Russia in 1918 resulted in formation of several independent workshops with different creative philosophies: Joltovskiy (neoclassical workshop), Golosov (Symbolic dynamism) and Ladovskiy (Rationalism): Melnikov tried to join each of these groups, but ended up realizing that the creative concept of all of the groups was alien to his nature. He felt that his talent could not be embraced within the limits of a certain methodology,

but was more like a permanent generator of novel ideas. Thus, Melnikov found himself isolated in his creative work.

Melnikov was one of the first to propose the new typologies based on the new socialistic model. In his winning entry for the National Competition for the Model Workers' Housing in Moscow, he proposed a novel interpretation of life in a workers' quarter and explicit artistic solution of the exterior. Apart from the saw-like attached houses, where every apartment had an independent entrance from the ground floor and a front garden, Melnikov proposed the first communal housing in Russian architecture. It consisted of four-storied buildings linked by the communal sector with the transit passage on the roof level.

Almost every Melnikov's design was a surprise and something completely new. There was nothing in all his works to identify them with the same architect. Every project was an individual response to the social challenge as well as a new artistic solution; Melnikov truly believed that any repetition in any aspect of one's own architecture was stagnation, while interpreting anything from existing work of the others was plagiarism.

The peak of Melnikov's career was marked by the construction of the Russian pavilion at the Paris Exhibition in 1925. This project brought him international recognition. In Le Corbusier's opinion the Russian pavilion was the only project worth attention at the exhibition. While overseeing the construction in Paris, Melnikov received several commissions for buildings in the French Capital. Two were garages, one of them - a garage-bridge across the Seine. In this unusual project, he preempted some structural solutions fully developed only after the World War II.

Another important contribution of Melnikov was the design of worker's clubs. That was a unique typology, characteristic only for Soviet Russia – an important public focal point that replaced a Church.

The Orthodox Christian Church was a central component of Russian pre-revolutionary social life. It constituted the basis for social interaction organized around the common Christian faith. In Moscow alone before the Revolution there were eight hundred parishes (now there are four hundred). People would attend a liturgy at least every Sunday morning and the Evening Service on the eve before that. After the Liturgy everyone would proceed to the parish dining hall to socialize over the breakfast meal.

After the Church was banned by the Soviets, the working people were encouraged to socialize in the name of another common cause – Socialism. There workers would spend their leisure time meeting with colleagues, discussing socialistic ideas, and engaging in various activities. There were a lot of “worker’s clubs” and “red corners” created all across the country. By 1926, when the new construction for clubs was commissioned there were already three and a half thousand of them.

Melnikov created seven clubs in three years, commissioned by the “Profsojuzi” (Soviet version of professional unions), which aimed at providing the workers with local cultural centers in a short time. These works also explicitly demonstrate Melnikov’s synthetic and comprehensive approach, embracing a lot of aspects often on an intuitive level, which was totally different from that of his colleagues, “constructivists” or “formalists” working with a concrete methodology. In other words, constructivists advocated exhibition of the structural logic as a primary design principle, while all else was secondary. Formalists believed that a formal composition of geometrical shapes was what guided the design and creates architecture. Melnikov intuitively worked with both principles simultaneously, never trying to coherently explain the process. He developed the unique program for his buildings out of social necessities, and at the same time was able to give it a unique formal expression, using his artistic intuition, developed at the School of Painting.

Melnikov believed that a club should diversify a worker's life, being able to accommodate various programs that may even change over time. Assuming that, he proposed a system of transformable auditoriums, as key elements, that could either function separately, or be united into one big space. In the Rusakov Club, he turned these auditoriums into main façade elements that rendered a unique recognizable image and spatial composition to the club.

Largely as a result of his club designs, Melnikov's reputation grew, but in early 30's he found himself more and more severely criticized in the press. After 1934 Melnikov did not build a single important project, and after 1936 didn't design one. He remained in total oblivion until his 75th anniversary in 1965, when The Union of Russian Architects decided to open an exhibition of his works. After that exhibition, where a lot of visitors, especially of younger generation of architects were shocked by their total ignorance of Melnikov's existence, his reputation was gradually reestablished. He was again included in the textbooks on the history of contemporary Russian architecture, and again became an important architect to study at architectural schools.

Downfall of the genius. Possible underpinnings.

In analyzing the causes of Melnikov's steep downfall, it's easy to conclude that advent of "Stalinism" was the main one. Generally this is true, but there were other accompanying factors in the pre-Stalin era, that greatly contributed to the plummeting of his career. One important factor was Melnikov's personal character. Indeed, assuming that Melnikov's main crime was "formalism," that was against the newly accepted line of "Neo-Realism," how can we account for the fact that at the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Architects, where Melnikov's fate was sealed by the decision of the majority, the purgation of "formalism" was far from complete? How could we explain the mostly uncompromisingly formalist buildings designed after the congress by Ivan Fomin? Why was the prominent formalist thinker N. V. Dokuchaev allowed to deliver a long speech at the congress, and, finally, how could Leonidov, initially bracketed with

Melnikov as “a formalist” be permitted to continue work at the Academy of Architecture and publish projects? In his book “Solo Architect in a Mass Society” (1978) Frederick Starr suggests that Melnikov’s “apparent haughtiness” prevented him from forging important connections in the architectural world, connections necessary to defend him from the flow of criticism that eventually turned him into a Union of Architect’s “scapegoat”.

This opinion on Melnikov’s attitude is confirmed by two people who knew Melnikov and talked to him personally. Both of them, professors of the Moscow Architectural Institute, agree on the fact that Melnikov was absolutely confident in his own genius, was not much interested in the opinion of his colleagues, and his statements about them often verged on arrogance. Let’s turn to Melnikov’s notes about himself in his diary.

“I will speak of Architecture as if I speak of myself. Or when I speak of myself that means I speak of Architecture”.

“Architecture has chosen me, pure and free from din of words, to be the victim of its generosity”.

“My reckless accounts for the lustre of my professional victories”.

“You think I consider myself a genius? No, I am an architect. It is the same.”

These statements obviously speak for themselves.

His outspoken opinion about his professional colleagues of the 20’s and 30’s was rather critical. Of all Soviet architects he valued only Joltovski, his teacher at the Academy, as well as Leonidov, whom he considered a talented personality. He strongly criticized Ginzburg for his interest in Western architecture, who in “bringing in the western influence deprived our Architecture of its individuality”. Melnikov was not ignorant of the contemporary Western architecture, but never thought he should somehow implement or interpret its experience. He considered Le Corbusier “a rationalist, who dried out the essence of the profession”. In 1933 Melnikov was invited to participate in the fifth Milan Triennale – the international architectural

exhibition, with twelve individual expositions, including that of Wright, Le Corbusier, Mies Van Der Rohe, Walter Gropius, Mendelssohn. Later he recalled this event with these words: "The Milan exhibit demonstrated, that all twelve maestros are coddled by the ease of their professional victories, that the novel technology (until there is another novel technology) is regarded by them as an architecture, and that with the great satisfaction these people have grown from architects into engineers". Actually, the only Western architect of that period that Melnikov valued was Wright, who, like Melnikov was an individual who never conformed to the architectural establishment.

The opposition between the two main architectural groups of "formalists" and "constructivists" and smaller divisions within these groups that started right before the revolution did not cease by the end of 20's. On the contrary, it reached the scale in which by 1930 the Five-Year Plan was tied up in endless wrangling. At this point the Party, which had previously refrained from directly involving itself in the field of professional controversy, now took the profession under the control and reorganized all separate groups into one Union of the Soviet Architects.

Melnikov, who had almost nothing to do with intergroup controversies, became a target for almost everyone. In a series of articles from 1929 to 1930 almost every one of Melnikov's designs after his return from Paris was harshly criticized. No one even cared that there was absolutely no agreement on what mistakes had Melnikov really made. These attacks lacked consistency, which was similar to the battle in the field of Soviet literature.

The final charge against Melnikov was brought at the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Architects in 1937. There in a consecutive statements by the influential Soviet architects "formalism" and Melnikov as a promoter of such, had been overthrown. Leaders of the Union asked him to submit a thorough critique of his own work as a condition of renewing his career. Melnikov replied that the Union, instead should fund an exhibition of his work and publish his

monograph. The Union promptly broke all the ties with Melnikov, and deprived him of the right to practice and to teach. His career was over.

Conclusion.

Melnikov worked in the period of dramatic social change in Russia, when architecture professionals across the world were in search of new directions, and architects in Soviet Russia were suddenly faced with new social challenges. Melnikov's artistic background, the reconfigured social structure of those times, as well as his individualistic creative position, contributed to the original quality of his works. He had no articulated creative concept, nor did he wish to join any of the existing creative groups. Khan-Magomedov believes that Melnikov was the only architect of the 20th century, who created a great number of principally different works of such a degree of novelty that not only distinguished his works from those of other architects, but also his own works one from another. It might be assumed, that the originality of the Russian architecture of the 20's through the 30's, and Melnikov in particular, was due to the lack of Russia's integration in the global architectural discourse. But Soviet architects, Melnikov's in particular, were very well aware of what is going on in the Western architectural scene. Melnikov had traveled to France and Italy to participate in the international exhibitions and witness projects of his Western colleagues, but he simply refrained from negotiating with any of the existing architectural trends. Perturbations in Russian social structure resulting in request for new architectural typologies gave them enough material to create the new, the unique. Where else in the world were architects to develop the new typology of a "workers club", "model communal housing", or "an industrial city of a new type"? These typologies evolved not out an architect's mind, but out of revolutionary social reconstruction. All Soviet architects took professional advantage, so to say, out of these changes, and created something interesting. Yet Melnikov was able to achieve "higher" results than his colleagues, because his

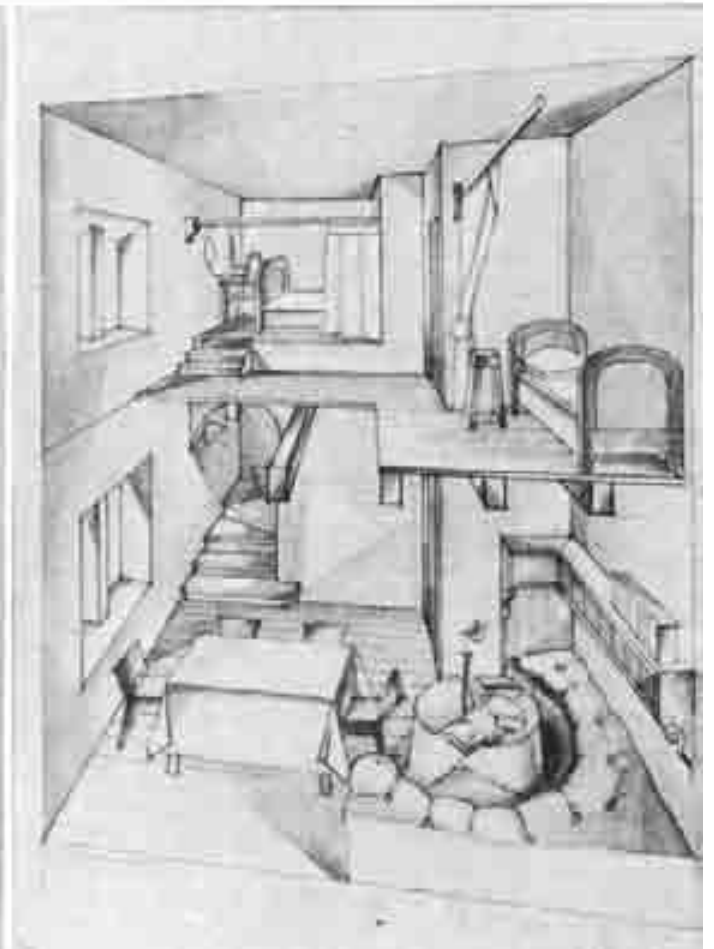
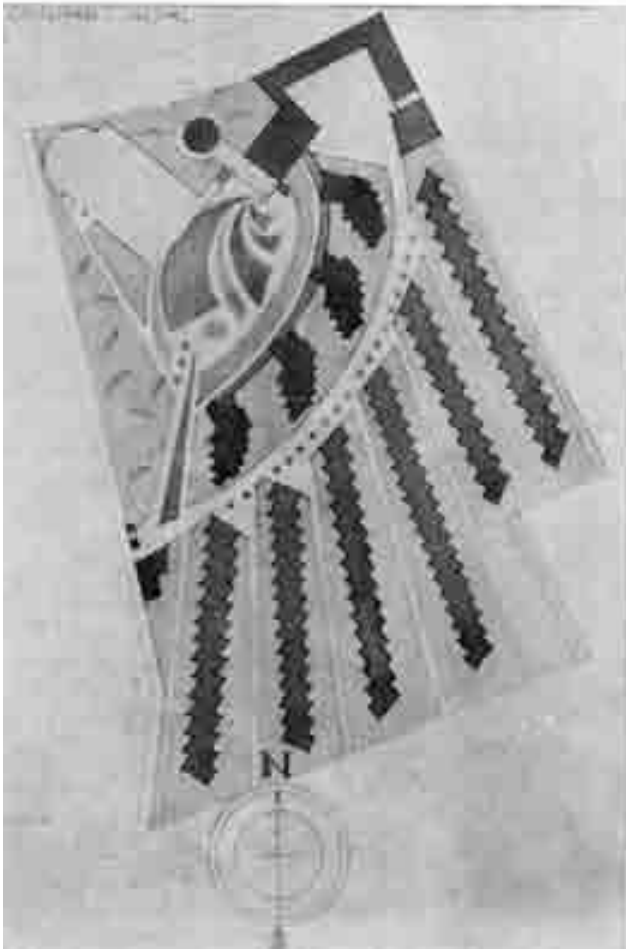
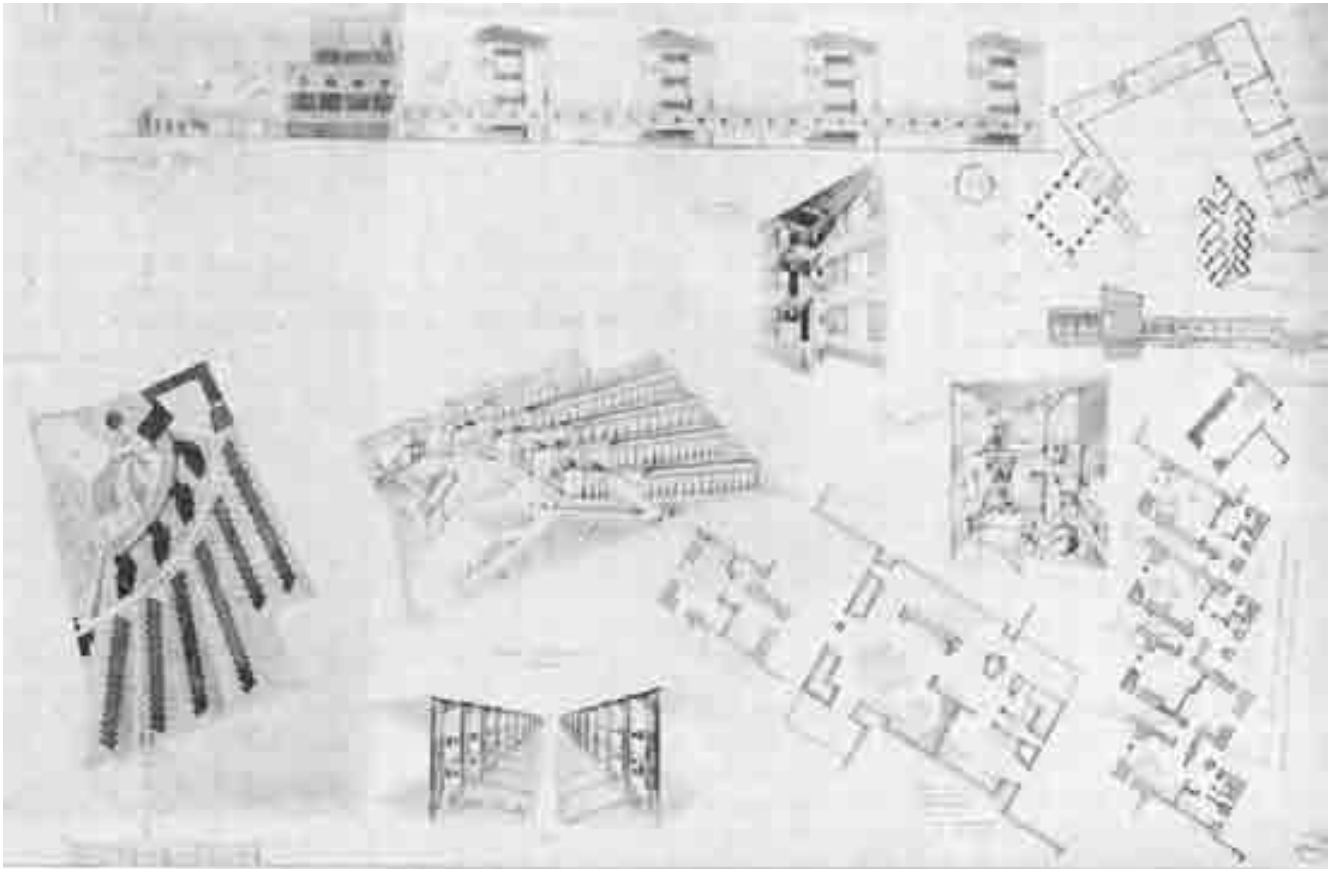
creative process was not limited to any one approach, but involved both formalist's and constructivist's aspects, and, more importantly, was reinforced by the high artistic skills he had developed in art school. At the same time, Melnikov's striking individualism had its negative side. His total confidence in his own genius and refusal to associate with the professional community brought him trouble later in his career, when he would need the support of other professionals in the field to withstand the ever-changing climate on the Soviet architectural scene.

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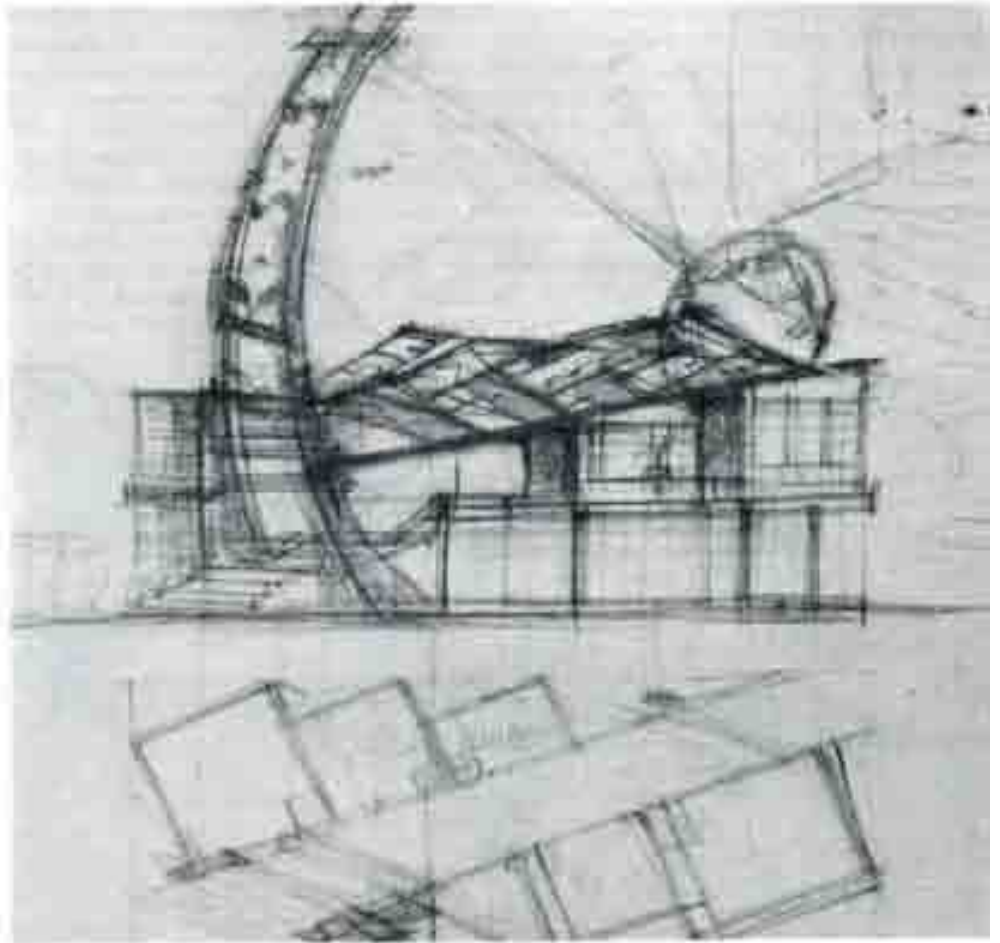
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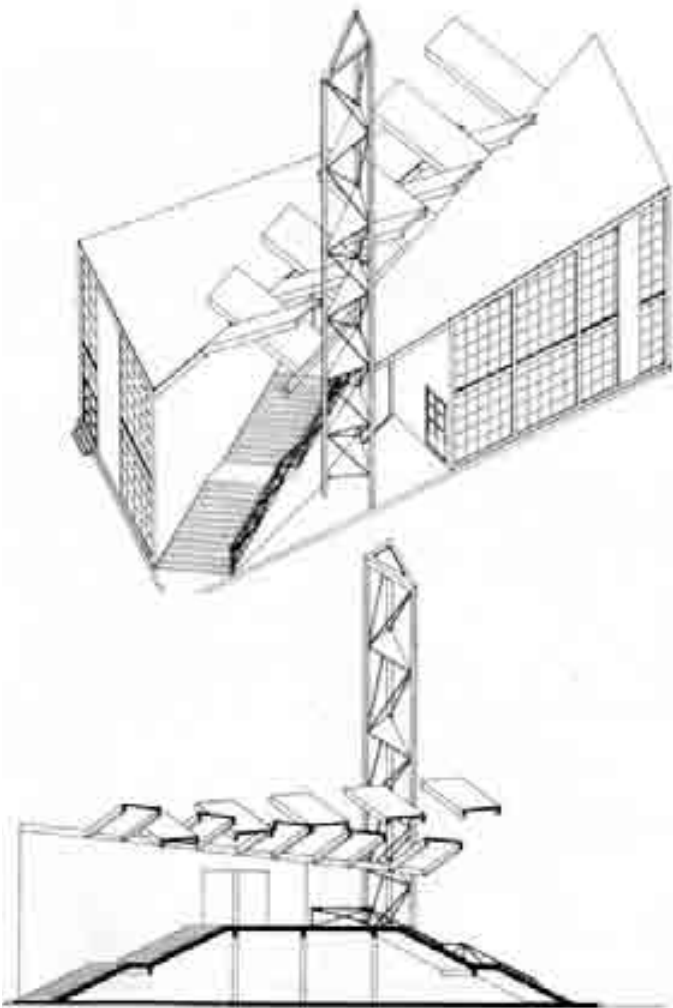
K.S.Melnikov self-portrait



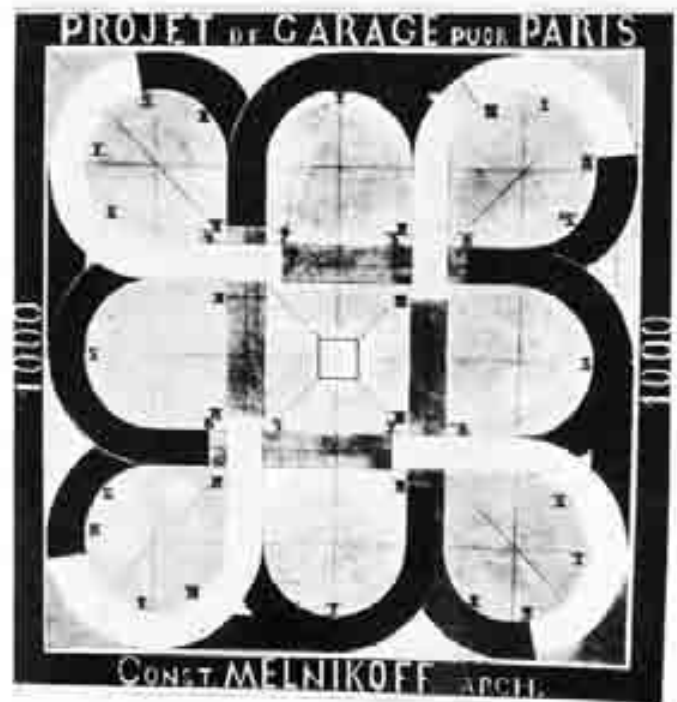
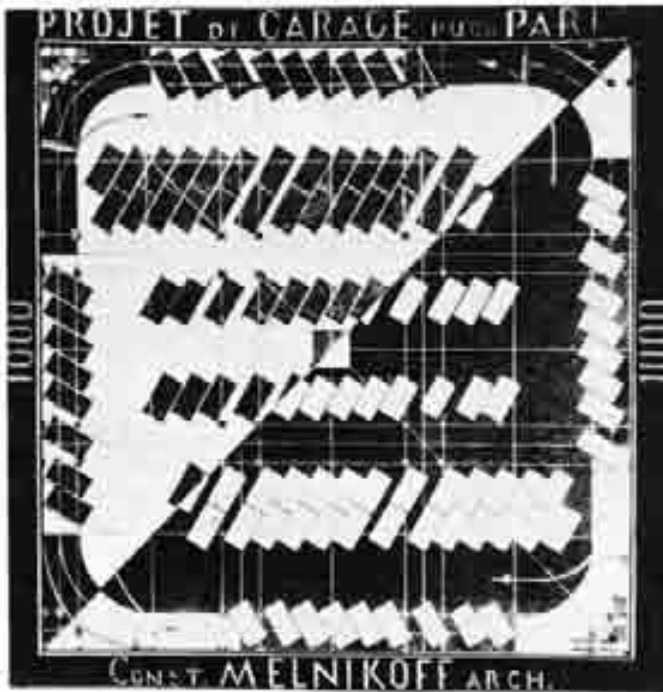
Competition for the Model Worker's Housing in Moscow. (1922-1923)



Russian pavilion at the Paris Exhibition (1925)



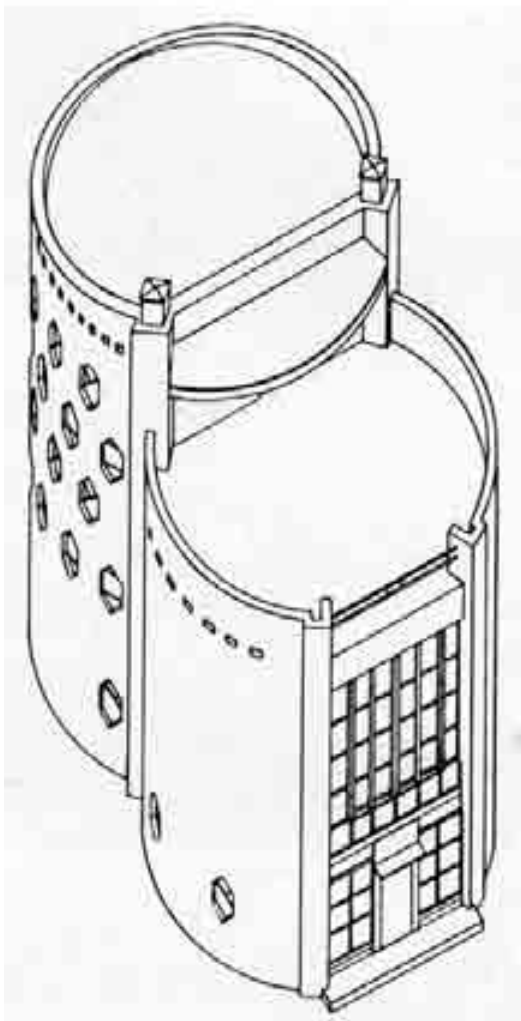
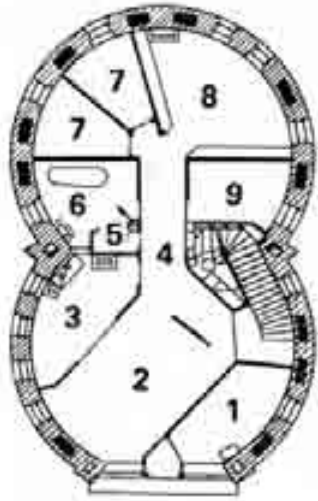
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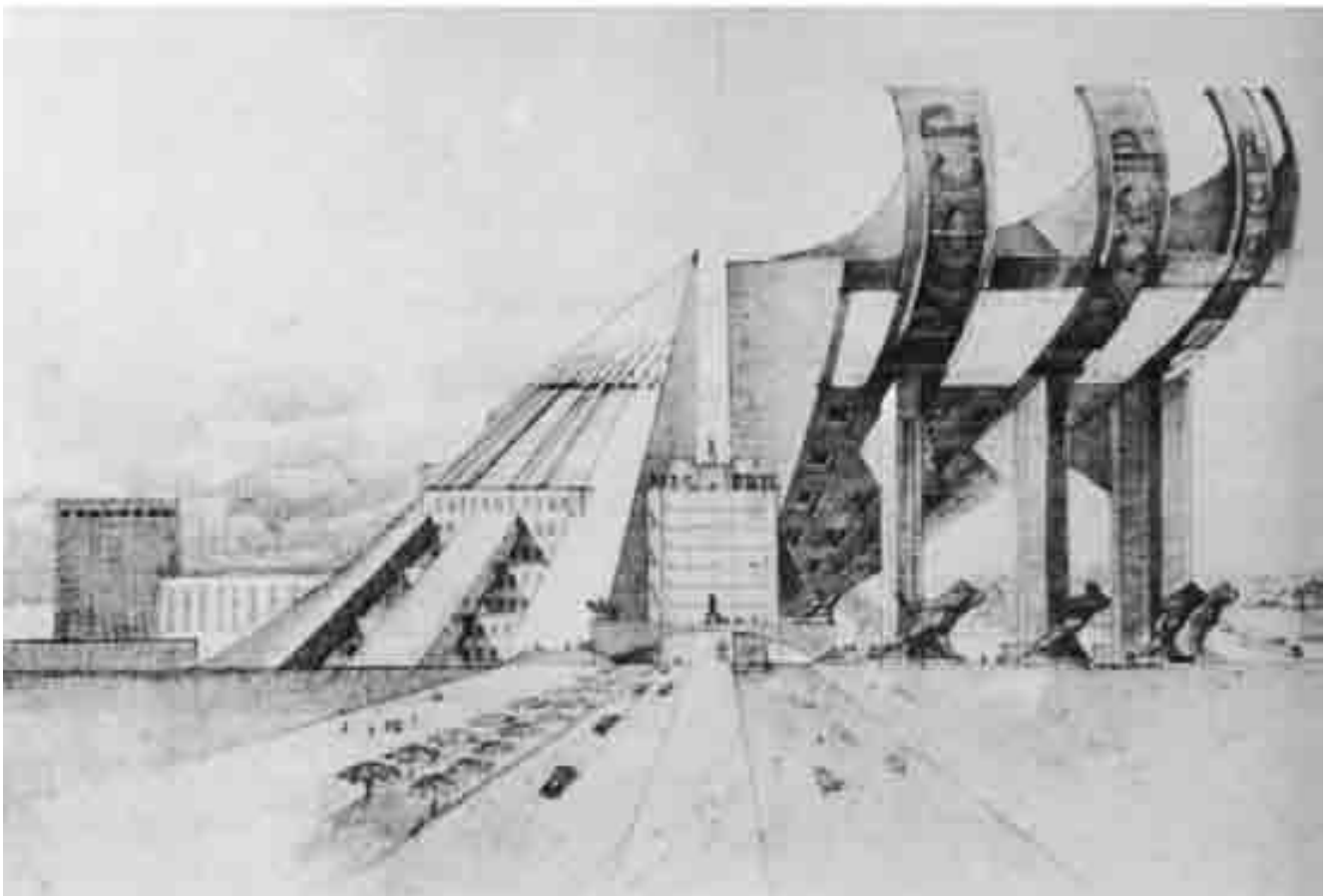
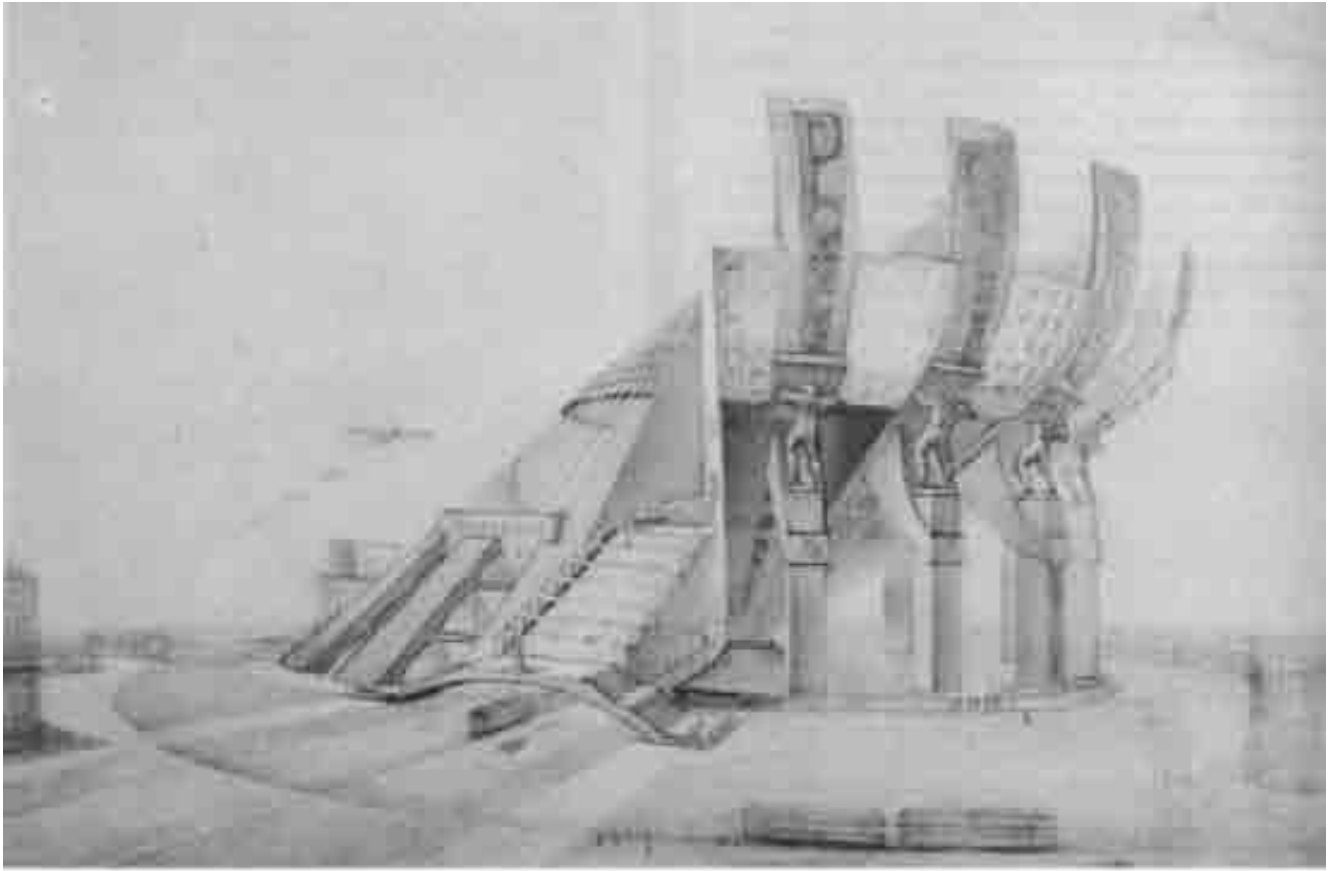
Taxi garage in Paris. Cubical variant (1925)



Rusakov Worker's club
(1927-1929)



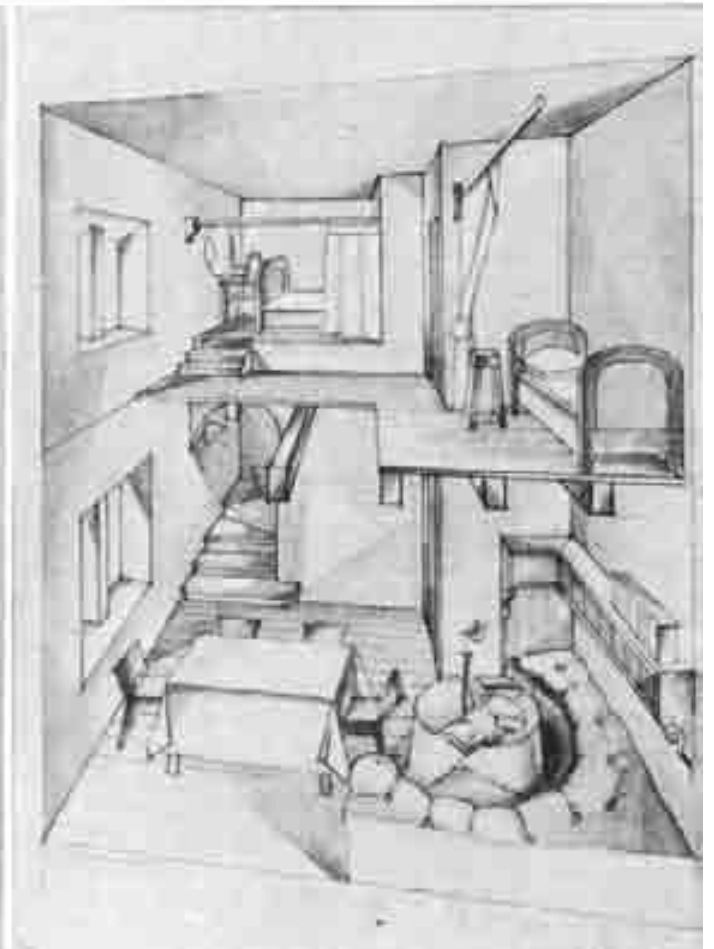
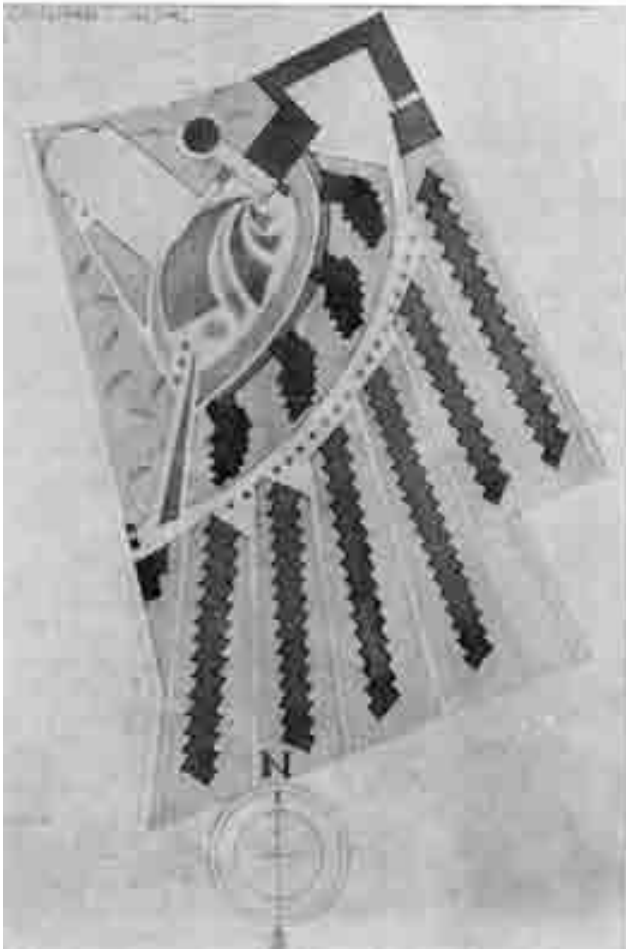
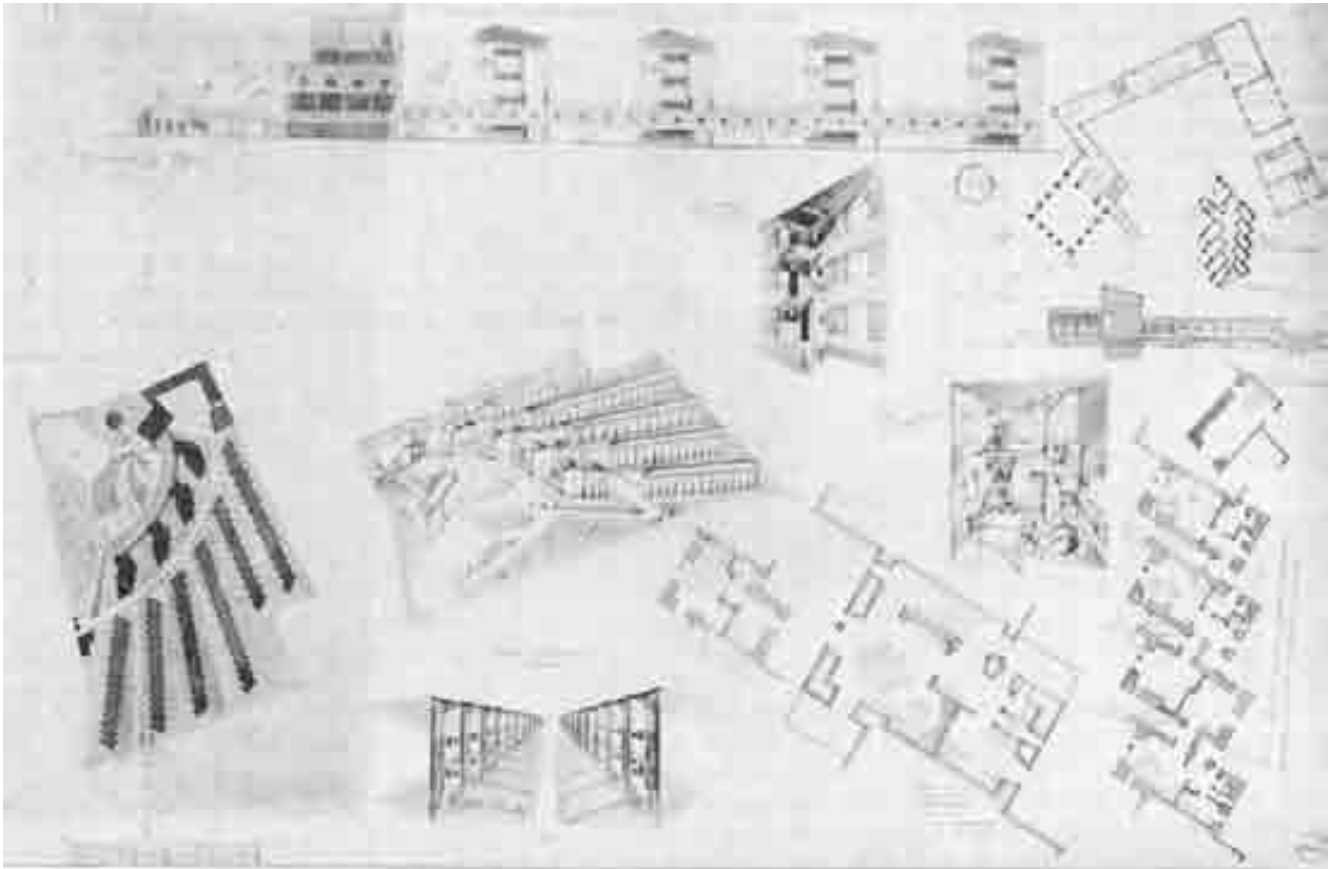
Melnikov's house-workshop
in Moskow (1927-1929)



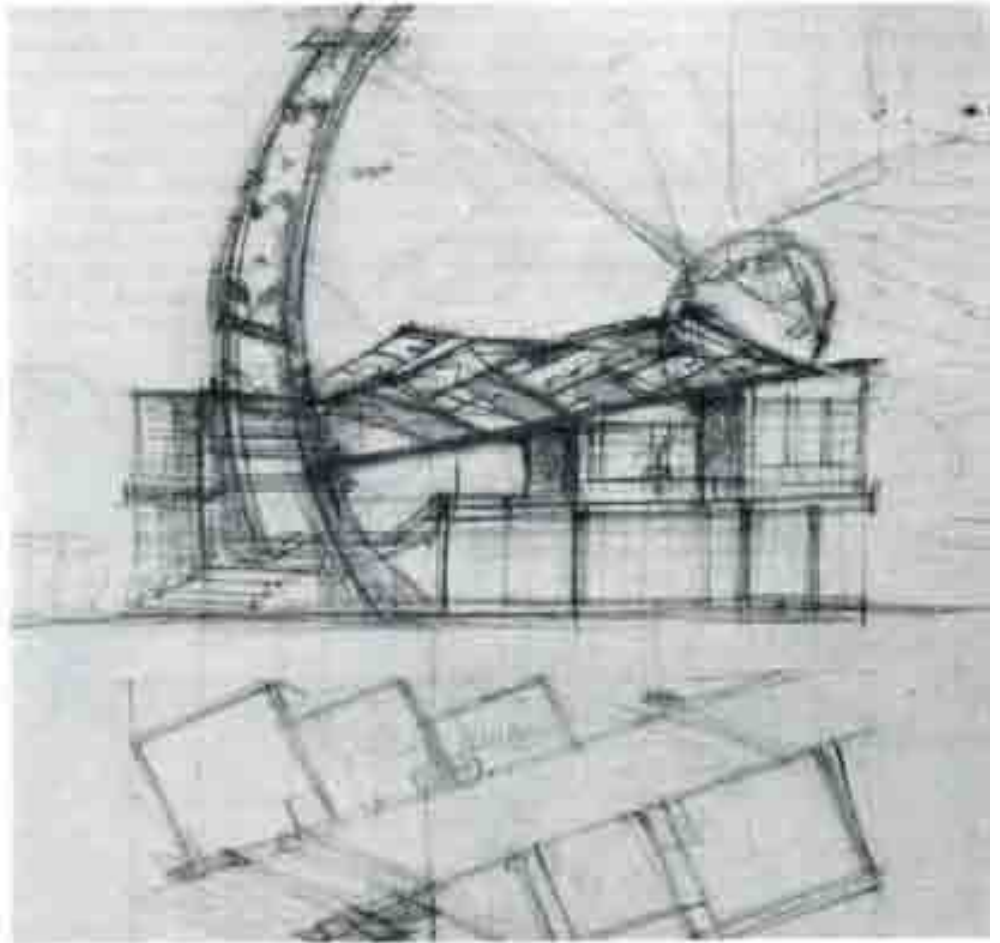
Palace of the Nations competition entry (1931-1933)



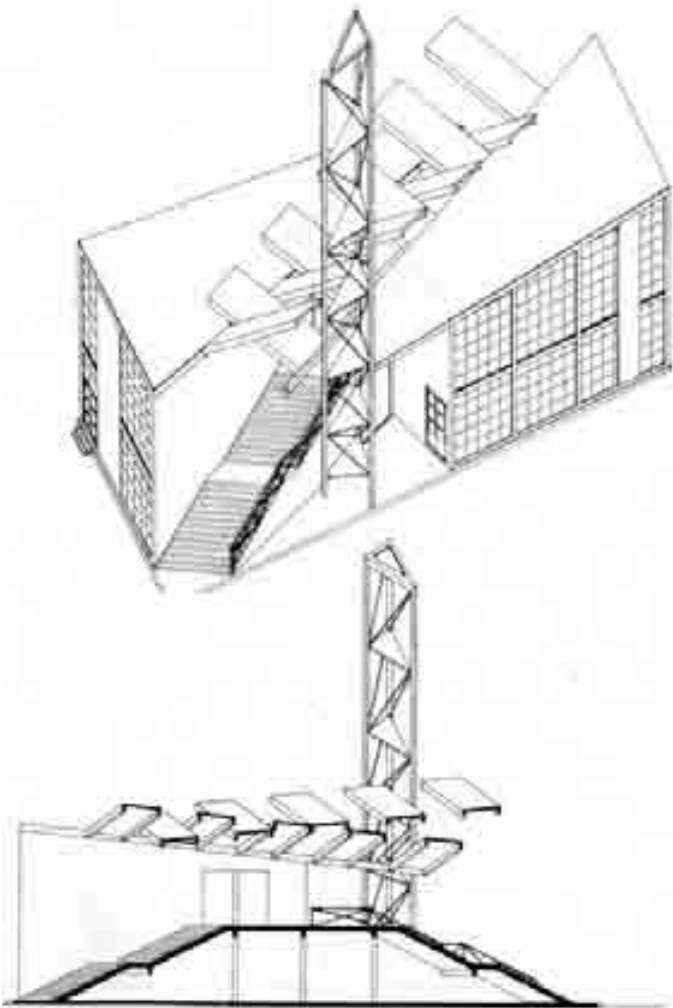
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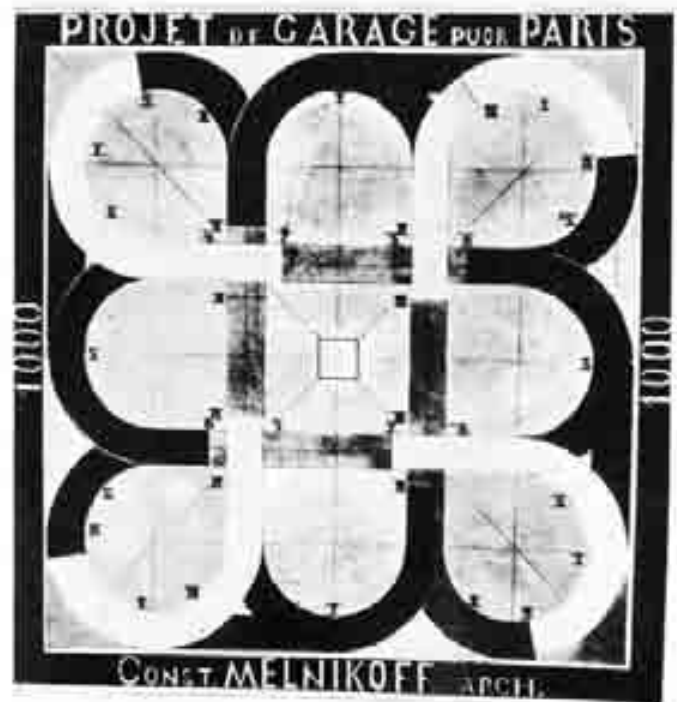
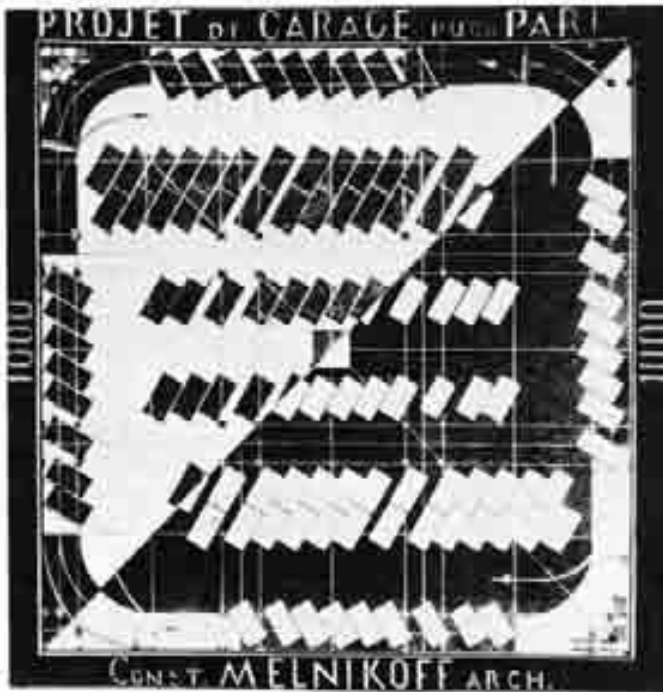
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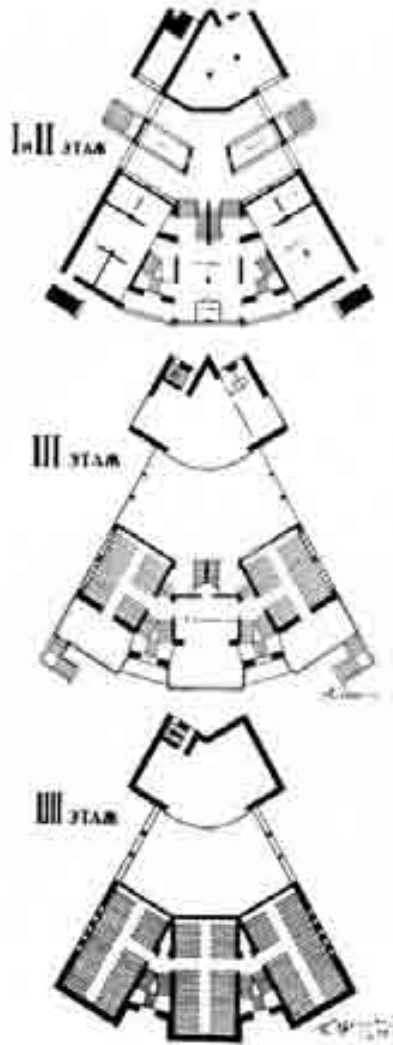
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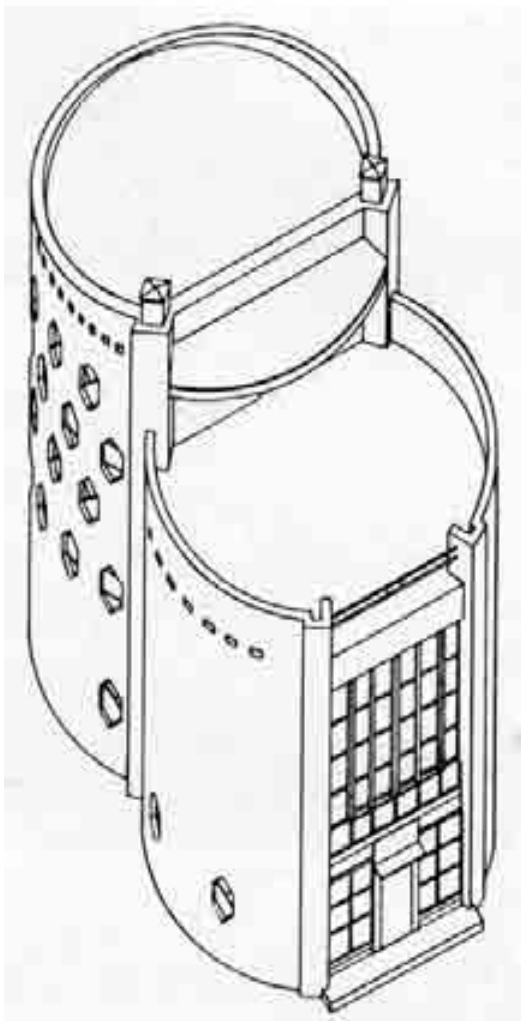
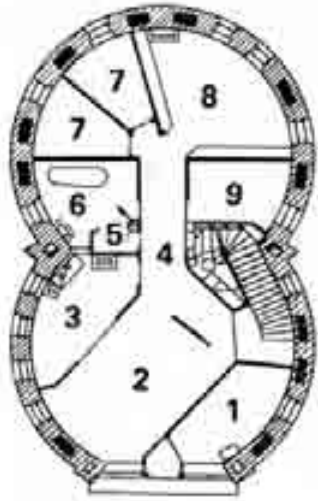
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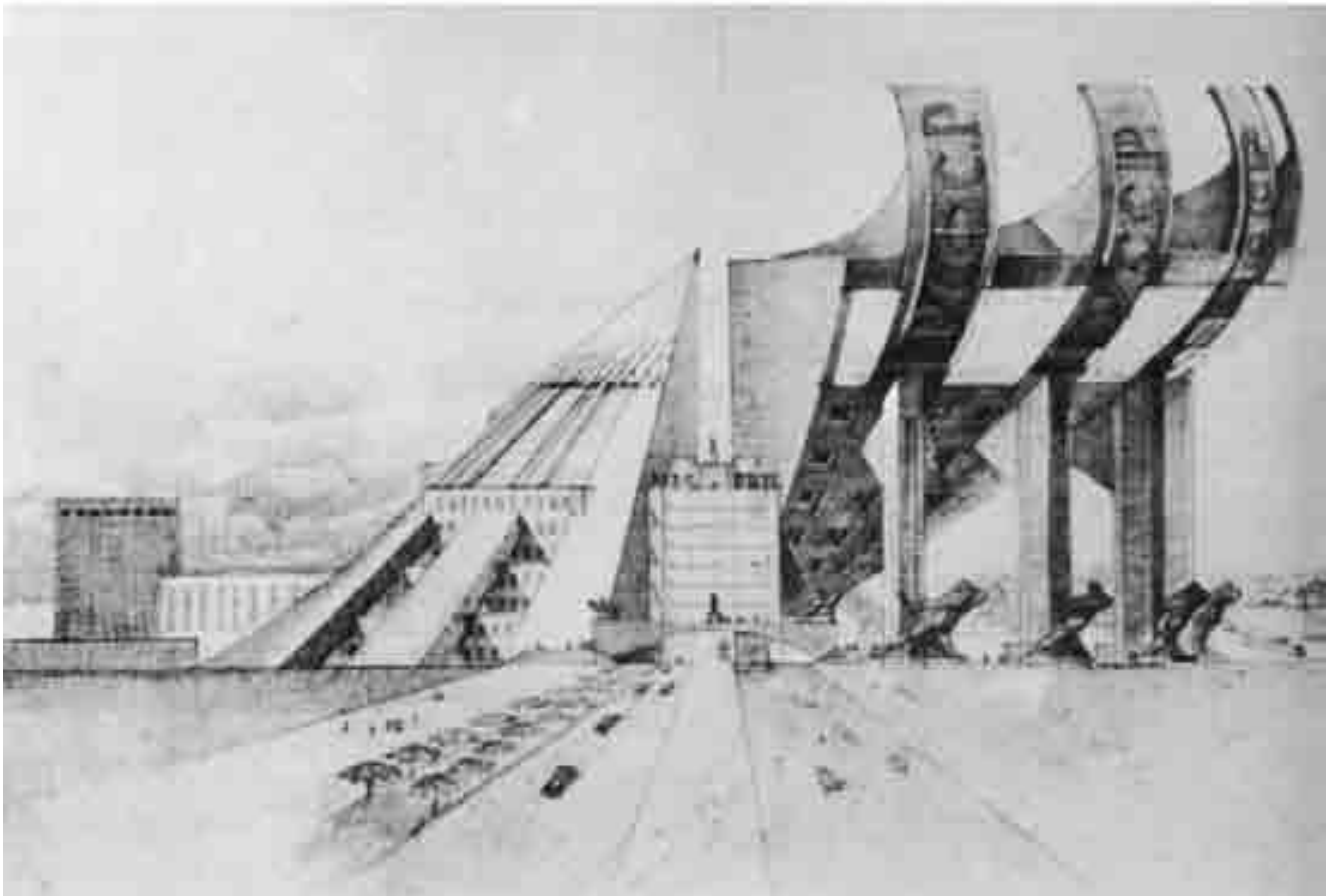
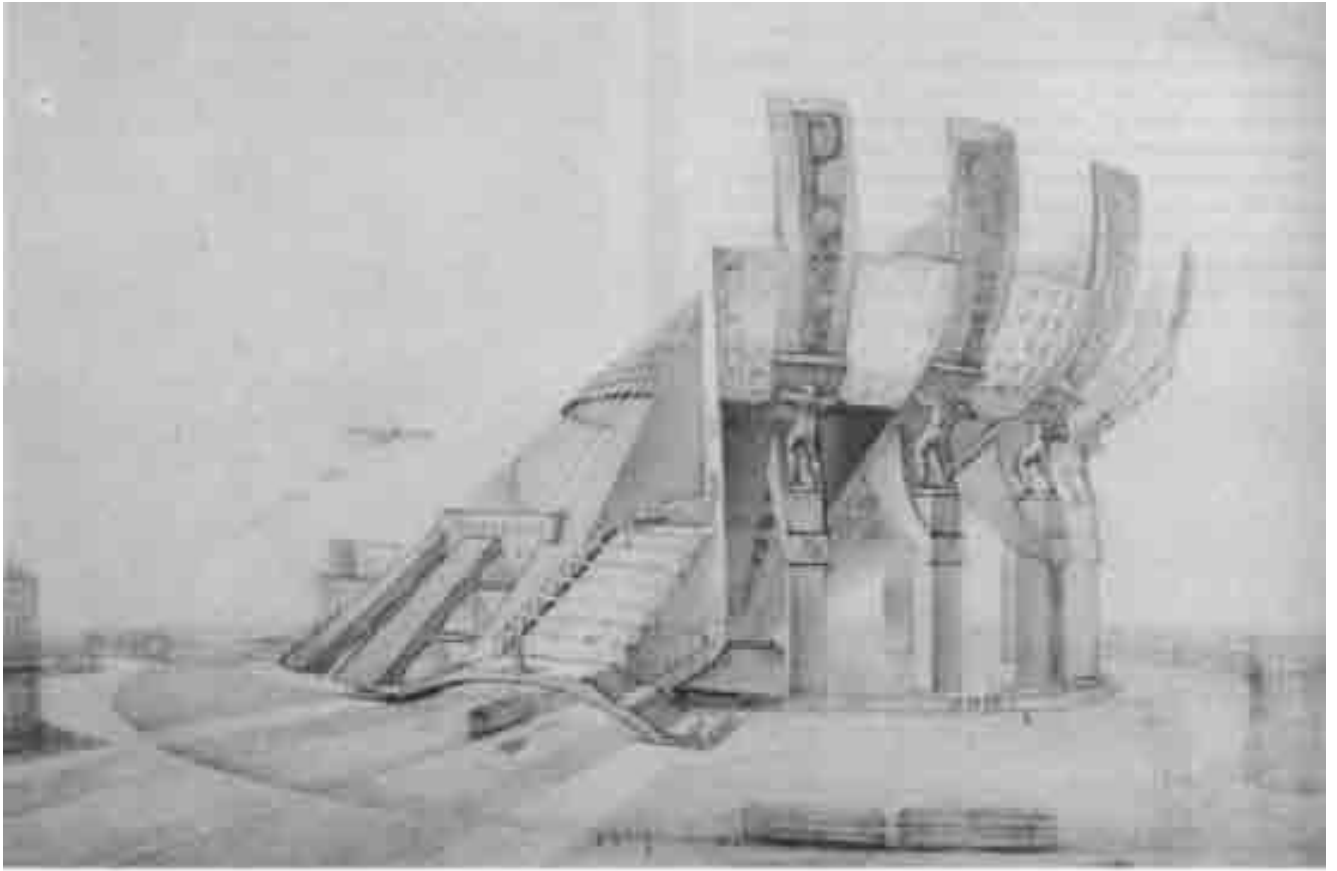
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