

DOMESTICITY AND SURVEILLANCE: THE MELNIKOV'S HOUSE EXAMPLE

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ABSTRACT

Konstantin Melnikov designed his house in 1927. At the time he was an internationally renowned architect, but the political changes gradually withdrew him from his architectural practice. After being banned Konstantin Melnikov lived nearly in seclusion in his house the rest of his life. The inscription on the top of his house – *Konstantin Melnikov Architect* – contradicts the socialist spirit that then ruled. The inhabitant's individual affirmation reveals a dissonant spirit with its context and the epoch he belongs. With this inscription, he underlines his right to individuality, as shown by several rooms conceived to the individual labor in this house. On the other hand, the analysis of this house allows the identification of different kinds of surveillance. One refers to the interior vigilance and mutual control between family members and the other is related to the possibility the house's inhabitant was given to surveil the exterior surroundings. In his studio Konstantin Melnikov could observe the exterior space. Nevertheless, we can also recognize the will of interior surveillance in the conception of several rooms, such as the dining room, the dressing room or the bedroom. Especially in the last one similarity to the Jeremy Bentham's panoptical model principles can be recognized. The architectonic inventiveness recognized in several solutions developed in this house is a motive of growing interest when confronted with the contradictions that involve the inhabiting practices of this house.

Keywords: Melnikov, domesticity, individuality, collectivity, surveillance.

THE HOUSE THAT KONSTANTIN MELNIKOV BUILT TO HIMSELF

On the top of the building located at the number 10 of Krivoarbatsky Street, in Moscow, we can read the inscription *Konstantin Melnikov architect*. This house was

designed by the architect in 1927. In this period he was at the peak of his career, having several assignments, such as, the *Rusakov club* or the *Svoboda factory's club*. Despite being rather young, he enjoyed a certain international recognition at the time. Along with the posterior turbulence of the Russian Revolution of 1917, a considerable part of Melnikov's architectonic production is developed in this interesting context of creation. The exceptional solution developed in this house also emerges in this context. The house's project reveals the search for a domestic territory that should be alternative to the social and economic chaos that was lived in the post Revolution period. The constructive solution developed, that opted for peripheral brick structural walls and wooden slabs, allowing the inexistence of punctual structural support in the interior of the house, reflects the architect's inventiveness. Being close to the modernist approach, Melnikov maintains himself attached to the most perennial condition: he uses the scarce elemental resources available, to develop new propositions through innovative solutions. His professional prosperity would meet an end with Stalin's rise to power. Under the new leader, modern architecture was no longer welcome in Russia, so Melnikov was progressively inhibited from his practice. From this moment on Konstantin Melnikov lived in isolation practically the rest of his life, devoting himself to painting as a means to support his family.

This house would be a strange object wherever it would be located. The house contrasts in scale and language with the urban context. This little single family house is surrounded by multifamily buildings with several floors. The strangeness of its presence questions its origin and this query without an immediate answer reveals its uniqueness.

The house is located at a plot that confronts the public street with its smaller size. The confrontation of the private property with the Krivoarbatsky Street is made by a wooden fence, that maintains the transparency of Melnikov's plot. Only in the entrance zone, the spacing between the vertical elements made of wood is reduced, diminishing the interior's visibility. Associated to the fence's opacity in the entrance surroundings, there is also a curved element creating a spatial filter, which prevents a frontal view of the house when entering from the public space to the private property. There's an opacity imposed to those who wait to enter the house perimeter. The gate underlines the threshold and this spatial transition announces the inhabitant the entrance to a different nature of space.

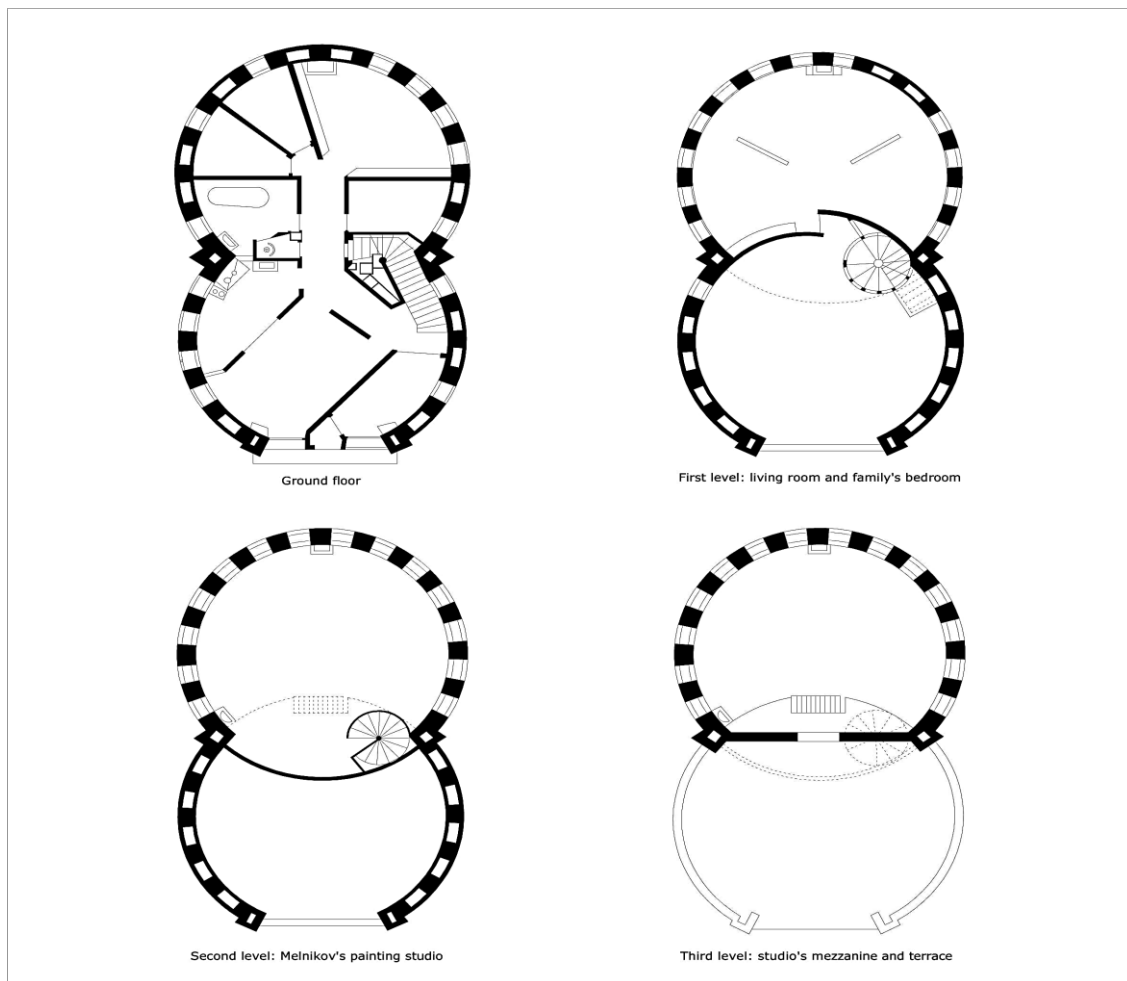


Fig. 1: Melnikov's house plans. Source: Re-drawn by the author

The house is based in an atypical compositional form (Fig. 1). Melnikov's house plan is the result of the reunion of two circles. Nevertheless this reunion doesn't mean that each circle doesn't claim its independence in the final volumetric shape. Despite the reunion of the two cylindrical volumes, there are two lateral chimneys that underline the intersections between them. Functionally, this distinction can also be identified, since each cylinder has a different usage. The different spaces are distributed through the several levels of the house constraining the possibility of a simultaneous inhabiting of the different cylinder interiors.

The cylinder closer to the street holds the rooms devoted to social life. In the ground floor we can find the entrance hall, the dining room and the kitchen. The first floor comprises the living room, opened to the city through a view window. In the interior of the other cylinder, connected to the interior of the block, lie the most reserved spaces. In the ground floor is the bathing room, the water closet, Melkinov's son, daughter and wife daily rooms and a dressing room for the family. In the first floor, contiguous to the living room, is the family's bedroom. The level above holds Konstantin Melnikov's painting studio. The social areas sit in the cylinder, which is connected to the public space (the Krivoarbatsky Street), and the private program stands in the posterior part of the building, kept away from the public view. The two types of windows recognizable in this construction also reveal the same public-private distinction. If in the 'social cylinder' there is a wide opening, spanning entrance, dining room, kitchen and living room, which create an open relation with the exterior,

in the 'private cylinder' the strategy of the openness to the exterior is remarkably different, with smaller windows more abstractly positioned.

Although at a first glance the house may seem a foreign object, through the wide opening the architect seems to affirm the house's belonging to his time and place. Through the window located at the south façade the house connects itself to the place, as it is the only element that clearly establishes a geometrical relation with the surroundings, as well as a direct relation between the interior space of the house and the exterior space of the city. The window emerges geometrically from a parallel cut to Krivoarbatsky Street in the cylindrical volume, opening the house to the city. This big window is the only one allowing the observation of the house's interior space; the other voids maintain the hermetic image of the construction. Nevertheless, with this window the house also relates itself to its time, as the view window comprises different rooms, assuming its shape regardless of the interior's program distribution.



Fig. 2: Present exterior view of Melnikov's house exterior. Source: Image courtesy of Professor Natalia Dushkina.

In opposition to the public façade there is a more intimate volume emerging behind, with its peculiar windows and its backstage location (Fig. 2). It is a mysterious part, a container that seems to enclosure something that may be preserved or hidden. The thicknesses of the exterior walls, which dilute before the dimension of the view window, seem to expand when connecting to the smaller hexagonal openings. Besides being completed in an uncommon shape, these profound holes closed by double framework, inhibit the interior's observation from the exterior surroundings. Watching from the outside it becomes extremely difficult to find out what happens behind those strange windows. In this project, the intimate takes refuge behind the social part of the house, and defends itself from the external view by an abstract strategy of positioning and unreferenced shape of the openings.

In this house we observe two different surveillance mechanisms. One is related to the vigilance of the interior space of the house, the other concerns the watching of the exterior surroundings. Melnikov in his studio controls the space around; from the possibility of vigilance he retains his power. In a different way, the spatial conception of the sleeping area also takes us to another kind of domestic surveillance. Although



in different senses, we recognize similarities to the Jeremy Bentham's panoptical model in both.

Panopticon is a term composed by *pan* (all, notion of total) and *opticon* (related to vision). Thereby panopticon alludes to the possibility of total observation, to all encompassing vision. The panoptical is an architectural model developed by the utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham in the late eighteenth century. This architectural model was invented after the English Industrial Revolution, emerging in a context defined by the urban demographical increment and the need to control social phenomena.

The panoptical model consists of an optimization of inmates' watching, by positioning the cells along the circular perimeter of the building and implanting a surveillance tower at the center of the cylindrical construction. The inmates' cells are closed by a grid in the confrontation to the circular patio and have windows turned to the exterior. The openness to the exterior space, as the exposition to the interior patio, provided an intense illumination of the cells' interior, which was contrary to the darkness that prevailed in the interior of the surveillance tower. This inversion allowed a superior efficacy of the surveillance for two reasons: on one hand the vigilant would be able to watch closer the prisoners' activities as their cells would be better illuminated, on the other hand the inmate, before the darkness of the tower, wouldn't be able to identify the presence or the absence of the vigilant. The presence of the tower would be enough to establish the feeling of being watched.

Imprisonment, which was previously represented by oppressive constructions (such as forts), kept inmates captive for it was physically impossible to evade the structures. With the panoptical model the inmates' detention succeeded by a different kind of subjection, which operated mostly at a psychological level. The inmate's detention derived of the feeling of being watched which consequently paralyzed him. The panoptical model allowed a lighter construction; the cells were more illuminated and ventilated. The inmate was deprived of intimacy. He hadn't the privilege of even a corner of his own.

At Konstantin Melnikov's house the dining room is the main social space of the daily routine. It is the space where the family gathers to have meals and where the guests are entertained. In this particular room we can identify a hierarchy. Konstantin's and Anna's initials, embroidered in the cloths covering the long backs of the parent's chairs standing in opposite sides of the table, are a clear example of this hierarchy. At the dining room the seat of each family member is clearly identified. Konstantin's chair shows, for example, that the architect would turn his back to the street. Seating with his back to the window he would also enjoy the natural light from the south that would illuminate his family, which he could, therefore, better contemplate. In opposition, he would be darkened by his position against the light, showing, however, an involving light around his figure. Perhaps this would be enough to stage or reinforce his patriarchal presence.

Individual spaces or the daytime inhabiting

In this house there is a separation between daytime and nighttime inhabiting. While each inhabitant had an individual room dedicated exclusively to the daytime inhabiting, in the nighttime period the entire family occupied a unique bedroom. In Melnikov's house the individual rooms are associated to daytime. This fact reveals that for this architect the individual reclusion may be related to the need of concentration or to the accomplishment of a specific activity. Resting or sleeping,

that along the history of the late centuries revealed to be a reason for the search of individual seclusion turns out to be a motif of reunion in this house. The inhabitant could isolate himself with the purpose of creating or studying, but while in inactivity each individual would join the other family members in a collective bedroom. The sleep was in this house a common activity; each one would watch one another. In this mutual watching there is an implicit sense of protection as well as a sense of surveillance.

Concerning the intimate and individual inhabiting an unusual programmatic design is proposed. Melnikov designed three individual rooms at the ground floor to his wife, son and daughter, and to him he designed a studio at the upper level of the same side of the house. Both Viktor and Ludmila (son and daughter) were given two similar rooms, located near the kitchen and the mother's room. Each of the descendants was allowed to have a space of their own, but the possibility of parents' surveillance was assured. Both Viktor and Ludmila rooms' are subordinate to the radial geometry suggested by the circular perimeter. The rooms' doors are located in the narrowest side and the hexagonal windows intersect the curved facade in an opposite position. The configuration of these spaces recalls the cells' spatial conception of the panoptical model.

The room that Konstantin designed to himself reveals very different features. He located his studio in the most secluded place of the house: distant from the street, from the ground, from the daily activity of the house and from the daytime spaces of the other family members. Moreover, on the program's distribution, there is an association of the mundane activities with the lower floor (bounded to the ground) and the activities related to the spirit with the upper levels (closest to the sky).



Fig. 3: Present interior view of Melnikov's studio. Source: Image courtesy of Professor Natalia Dushkina.

The studio is the only room in the house that enjoys an entirely circular shape, never completed and only implicit in the other rooms. The angle of approximately 260 degrees, completed by the façade, embraces the east, north and west, allowing the inhabitant to feel the sun's path all over the day enjoying the constancy of the reflected light from north, suitable to painting. In the 260 degrees of the façade there is a repetition of the hexagonal window on three different levels. This set of windows allows a control of the surrounding life. The peculiar silhouette and repetition of these windows, associated with the cylindrical shape of the studio seems to spatially evoke a kind of watchtower. In the studio the inhabitant is able to watch the exterior in almost all the perimeter of the room (Fig. 3).

Melnikov's studio acts like the watchtower of the panoptical model, but unlike Bentham's tower the studio has no cells around, this space is a tower of control that watches in a first layer the neighborhood and in the limit the city. The vigilant inhabitant sees his space illuminated with light and sights of the exterior through the panoptical windows, unlike the exterior watcher that cannot be aware of what is going on in the interior of that space. The double wall structure and the voids' abstract repetition inhibit the view's trespassing. From the interior, the inhabitant observes the exterior framed by the hexagonal windows. They attach the exterior views in the cylindrical wall as if they were screens. While seeing the house from the exterior, the studio's volume shows the hexagonal windows as dark and impenetrable voids. The studio's inhabitant watches the world from his illuminated shadow.

Nevertheless the studio inhabitant wouldn't only have the possibility to watch the world without being watched, as he would also be able to watch his own interior world as if he was outside. Melnikov was able to climb to the mezzanine gallery, which allowed him to dominate the vision of the interior space. In this sense the creative inhabitant would be capable of seeing his work from a distant and superior point of view (Fig. 4).

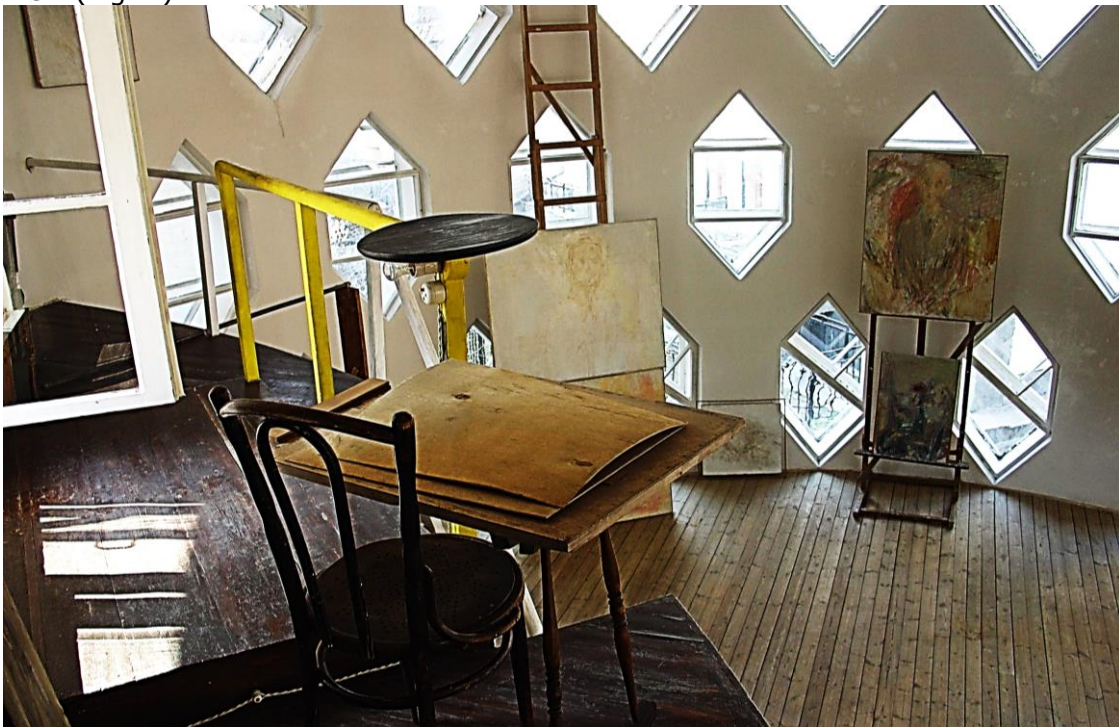


Fig. 4: Present interior view from the mezzanine of Melnikov's studio. Source: Image courtesy of Professor Natalia Dushkina.

The studio is devoted to the individual that searches for seclusion in order to develop his creative production. The complicity between Konstantin Melnikov and his son, Viktor, was such that it is known that they used to paint together. So, when Viktor decided to devote himself to painting, Konstantin Melnikov gave his studio to his son, transforming the living room, located at the first floor, in his new studio. It is curious that the close collaboration between Konstantin Melnikov and Viktor didn't result in a mutual use of the working space, but in the transformation of the house's program and the creation of a new studio, in order to create a new individual working space. Life's paths and inhabiting practices dictated that the living room, designed to be opened to the city, ended transformed in the second Melnikov's studio.

Sleeping: a common inhabiting

The Melnikov's family bedroom is of particular interest. Although we can identify three beds, it stands a unique room. The three sleeping areas are delimited by two thin wooden partitions placed in a radial position without touching the exterior or the interior walls. There aren't any doors creating effective closure between the three zones. The space's composition suggests that, regardless of the existence of two thin walls, the space was conceived as one. From the bedroom's entrance the inhabitant has a total vision of the space. In a different point of view, the bedroom's composition relates, once again, to the panoptical model. The possibility of a simultaneous control of the three sleeping areas, from a unique point of observation is similar to the model invented by Bentham (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5: Present interior view of the family's bedroom. Source: Image courtesy of Professor Natalia Dushkina.

The recognition of the panoptical strategy applied in the bedroom's conception raises some questions. From the medieval habits of sharing a common room while sleeping, passing through to the need of conceiving of more intimate structures such as

alcoves, to the claim of an individual room, several conditions, composition strategies and architectural devices were developed so as to allow an intimate inhabiting of space devoted to rest and intimate relationships. In the bedroom designed by Melnikov he proposes the reunion of the sleeping space. The two wooden partition thin walls are shown as inexpressive elements that only provide the inhibition of visual contact between the inhabitants while lying in bed. Nevertheless, every sound or movement is apprehensible. Although while in bed the family members aren't capable of seeing each other, the one who enters or leaves the room will be able to see simultaneously the three sleeping areas. To the inhabitants of this room being watched is an imminent condition.

Establishing the parallel to the panoptical model, the threshold that points the entrance into the room would correspond to the central watch tower. The compositional division of the three sleeping areas would be comparable to Bentham's strategy of the cell's distribution. The radial division, the positioning of the beds, the strong cell's illumination through the hexagonal windows and the consequent darkness of the entrance point, are all facts that consolidate the correspondence of this bedroom composition to the panoptical model. The bed's positioning, including the headboard's orientation, reveals to the option that exposes the inhabitants the most. The sleeping area dedicated to the parents was situated in the middle of the three zones. This positioning promoted the parent's control. They separated the son's and daughter's cells, watching and feeling all the descendants' movements.

Juhani Pallasmaa (Pallasmaa, 1996) refers Melnikov's obsession with cleaning. This author explains under this argument the architect's option for the rounded edges between concurrent surfaces in the bedroom and the location of the dressing room in the ground floor. If the rounded edges and the corners' banning really allowed an easier cleaning, its inexistence also promoted the continuity between surfaces, fomenting in the inhabitants a feeling of being hold by a single involving surface. Although there was a partition in three zones, the bedroom represented a single entity.

Melnikov paints every surface of the bedroom in *stucco lustro* painted pale golden yellow. This color and finishing, associated with a rich lightning that entered through the inhabitant's backs by the several hexagonal windows, certainly staged a golden awakening to the new day. The morning rise, seen as a kind of rebirth, would explain the mystical staging that is implicit in the bedroom's conception.

Besides respecting the radial composition, in the original conception¹ the beds were fixed to the floor. These pieces of furniture, also drawn by the architect, appear in the room like pedestals merged to the floor through the continuity allowed by the rounded edges. The fixed position implies a structural programming of its execution. So, in this house beds are constructive matter like walls and floors. The bed as a fixed pedestal ennobles the act of sleeping; however its fixed position promotes the paralysis' sensation of its inhabitants. In this sense the bed's conception belongs to

¹ Due to a legal dispute the Melnikov's archive is not available in the present moment and that is why it is not possible to publish images of the original state of the house. The photographs presented are a courtesy of Professor Natalia Dushkina, Professor at the Moscow Architectural Institute.



the whole staging and underlines the panoptical conception of the room. In this bedroom the nocturnal inhabiting converges between sleep's consecration, subtraction of individual reclusion and consequent inexistence of individual intimacy.

THRESHOLD SPACE

Other activities usually associated to the bedroom's scope where dislocated from its surroundings. Besides the daytime rooms Melnikov conceived to his wife and children, he created another room in the ground floor: the dressing room. The existence and location of this room reveals the willing of detaching the dressing activity from the bedroom. This programmatic distinction can be related to the cleaning issue previously referred, as it can also be connected to another kind of subjects. Although having an apparently secondary role in this house's program, there is no doubt that this room's conception reveals particular domestic inhabiting practices.

In the dressing room there are two sets of closets bordering the two radial walls. Each of these sets is distinguished by the color: the white one corresponds to the mother and daughter's closet and the yellow one bears the father and son's clothing. The color distinction doesn't translate individuality but emerges as a sign of gender of the family's members, although clothes are one of the most individual properties. The change of the proper garments to each particular situation required a visit to the dressing room. The passage from the domestic to the public, from interior to the exterior or from daytime to nighttime inhabiting, implied a transitory inhabiting of this space. In this sense, this room should be occupied amid different kinds of inhabiting, marking the daily routines. This room presents itself as a kind of threshold space, a space inhabited in a transitory manner, intercessor of different or opposing ways of inhabiting. The identification of this threshold reinforces the conviction of the opposing inhabiting natures coexisting in this house.

BETWEEN THE AFFIRMATION AND THE EXCLUSION OF INDIVIDUALITY

Melnikov conceives a domestic hymn to his own personality. His name's inscription reveals the public affirmation of his individuality in a period of the collectivism's cult under the era of the Soviet ideology. Challenging the system that had incited a common living conduct to each individual and that impelled Melnikov to the confinement of his house, the architect surely intended to underline the capital importance of each individual. However, Melnikov's house isn't the most favorable territory to completely experience individuality. Independently of the perversion that can be identified in the implicit will of surveillance observed in the conception of several rooms, it is important to put in context Melnikov's patriarchal spirit, associated to his apprehensible mystical nature. As other experiments developed by other architects, the project and inhabiting of this house reveals a laboratorial character. The family's daily life emerges, in a certain sense, as an experiment. The private life reveals to be an extension of the experience of the building of space and architecture appears as a potentially imposing discipline in the behavioral regulation, allowing or inhibiting behaviors through the spatial conformation.

Melnikov's youth context was characterized by the belief in architecture's possibility to enhance the human condition. Hope, revolution, or delusion, allowed the conviction in the possibility to shape, into a better being, the complex and contradictory human nature. Practically contemporaneous to the Melnikov's house construction (1929-1930) the architect develops, as a result of a competition to a complex's elaboration that should be built in the surroundings of Moscow called *Green City*, a building that he called *Sonata of Sleep* (Starr, 1981). In this project he explores devices and



architectonic conceptions that should allow its future temporary inhabitants the possibility to enjoy a rehabilitating sleep. The importance given to the individual rest, as theme of unquestionable importance in Melnikov's house as in the referred project, arises as a symptom of the belief that, in an Europe between wars and in a Russia in revolution, emerged implicit in the work of several modernist architects: architecture seen as a discipline that should actively participate in man's rehabilitation.

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