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Interview **with** Alexey Ginzburg and Natalya Shilova, **December, 2016**

by **Michał Murawski and Jane Rendell** (*g.m.murawski@gmail.com, j.rendell@ucl.ac.uk*)

The interview took place on Monday, 12th December, 2016, at the café in Sadler's Wells Theatre, next to Berthold Lubetkin's Spa Green Estate (1949) in London. Michał Murawski and Jane Rendell discussed with Alexey Ginzburg and Natalya Shilova the history of the social condenser and their ongoing renovation of the Narkomfin in Moscow.

AG: Alexey Ginzburg

MM: Michał Murawski

JR: Jane Rendell

NS: Natalya Shilova

AG: [With Natalya, we are analysing the development of residential architecture in Moscow.] In the middle of the nineteenth century, when capitalist society was already growing in the UK and the United States, there were estates established in Moscow, private estates, and some factory hostels, very simple ones. So, there was no idea of apartment buildings, although quite a few of them began to appear in the second half of the nineteenth century. But when the emancipation of the serfs took place in 1861, the nobility lost their source of profit and they began to rent their estates in the centre of Moscow [...] by cutting them into smaller pieces. This way, our

tenement houses appeared, when the estates were cut into huge parcels. Then, they started to construct tenement houses and started to do them as huge apartments like the Paris tenement houses of the nineteenth century, luxurious ones, with different entrances for the servants and the residents, and so on.

The highest point of capitalism [...] was at the beginning of the twentieth century, [...]. It was the time [...] when the demands of people in new circumstances, of people in new society became much clearer and an absolutely different typology of tenement houses starts to appear. The hotel-type tenement houses that we see constructed in 1910, 1911 and 1912. In some way, we see the predecessors of communal housing of the 1920s in these buildings. [...] And that was already somehow the social condensing which was from my point of view connected to the growing density in the city, growing density because of the evolution of the property costs, the property costs, which rose much higher than before.

JR: The move towards communal apartments might be understood as something happening in a lot of different cities at that time, but the specifics of the Moscow version of the 'social condenser', as far as we've been reading through the translations of articles from *Sovremennaia Arkhitektura (SA or Contemporary Architecture)* in the 1920s, share the idea that

to have these different forms is revolutionary and also can change people's behaviour, make them more, *socialist*, shall we say.

AG: Let's go to the social condenser. Today's understanding of that period seems to me a bit too *romantic*, somehow, idealistic. First of all, let's talk about communal apartments. That was an absolutely speculative way of doing something for poor people, because after the War, the Revolution and the Civil War, the poverty, the country was in a terrible situation and it was important for the Party to show that people who had money had to give back to poor people. They had to give some of their property to these people and this campaign began to make several families live in one big apartment. That is because some tenement houses with these big apartments already existed at this moment, and it was possible to break it up into pieces and convert it into a small hell, making several families live there. It was just a practical way of doing something, to solve the problem easily without special investments and economic possibilities. It was not a social experiment.

[...]

I'm talking about the situation when what we call 'communal apartments' in Russia appeared. It was a situation where there existed one big apartment and a few families were living there; each family inhabiting one room, using all the facilities in this apartment (the kitchen, etc.) together. But this was not because they wanted to do this. It was out of necessity. It was a way to increase density and make some families live, not in the basements, but in the apartments, and to show

some social policy of new power. The intention of this social policy was to give something to people who were poor.

MM: And to break apart the class structure, to squeeze [the bourgeoisie].

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AG: No, no, no, it was not breaking any class structure, because all the classes which were on the top before the Revolution were repressed, and they had less rights from the very first beginnings of the Revolution [...] There was the class of the peasants and workers, which had to be on the top and which was supported, and all the so-called 'previous classes' had to be repressed. So, it was not an experiment how to mix them up. It was just a way of trying to construct a social policy regarding the workers and peasants, because many people were going from the village to the city. The growing density of the cities during this capitalist growth [...] was the start of capitalist relations. [...] one of the significant attributes of capitalist society is when people start to live mostly in the city.

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[...]

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MM: But if you read Ginzburg, or Leonidov, for example, there is a constant return to this idea of 'epoch', and of defining a new style and a new architecture for the new epoch. So, then, Ginzburg and the other Constructivists, they make a radical break between the type of architecture that existed and that was possible before 1917, and what came afterwards. And you are saying that that break wasn't as that radical?

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AG: No, no, I'm just trying to find the roots of this [...] It was a new industrial era that changed relationships between people, and these new relations were connected to the new demands, the new way of life, and the new residential policy. Their understanding of the new big style was connected not only to residential buildings, of course, it was a total understanding and the early modernists all over the world, Mies van der Rohe as well as Ginzburg, were thinking [...] in the same way. They thought that the new epoch was providing new principles and new technology, and that these dictated the new principles of construction, new functions, which in turn dictated the new forms, and all this created a new architecture. That was their understanding, and at that time this was absolutely clear for European, Russian and American architects [...]

But if you go back to residential practices, there were two different theories at the time. In my opinion, they were absolutely different: the house communes and communal housing [...] This was how architects tried to answer in a more or less speculative way the ideological concerns, how they translated them. This was not at all the task of the Party, and I think that the Party leaders were quite far from these problems and were not thinking so deeply about this. But somehow people were thinking and were trying to find the answers, people like Vladimir Kuzmin, who was one of the main ideologists of these house communes, which have been constructed. The most well-known among them, which we can compare to the Narkomfin, just to understand what the difference was between these two typologies, was Nikolaev's house on Ordz-

honikdze Street. That was a 'pure house commune' where the idea of communal life in one house became transformed, as if this house was one big flat, one big apartment. You can imagine that it also had some roots from real life, because many peasants were coming to the city. They didn't know how to live in the city, they didn't know how to live in an apartment; they didn't know how to use the toilet and the bathroom. It was really a mess. It was a real problem. So, this was a way to quickly educate them. That's why the idea of cells for sleeping, huge bathrooms for collective bathing, a huge refectory for collective eating, and so on, this is how it was organised in these house communes. And this way of organisation of communal life as one huge apartment that also had some practical meaning. They were not idiots, at all.

JR: That is very interesting. So, you are arguing [...] that form can influence social behaviour, but that the new form doesn't come from an ideal of socialism, but rather from the practicalities of teaching rural people how to live in the city.

[...]

AG: The idea of communal housing that was realised in the Narkomfin House is something that could really be used as an explanation for the social condenser. The dense construction in the United States, is a good example, because their cities began to be constructed as dense ones immediately, because they already had high prices for property and the possibility of constructing tall

buildings, because of the steel frame and lift inventions. That's why we see these hotel houses, or apartment or tenement buildings of the hotel type, in the United States. These are also social condensers for the modern cities. The Narkomfin was different from them in that it was proposing a *milder* version, a socialist version of the social condenser, proposing more social functions, in a not-so-dense way. You know, Ginzburg was blamed for lowering the density on the site, and the idea of the second stage was invented as response to the accusation that the site was not being used densely enough in this project. So, this is the only difference from my point of view: a kind of socialist input into this social condenser. But the idea of social condensers for me comes from the capitalist city, which is growing and becoming denser [...]

JR: So, just to recap, your argument is that the social condenser is an urban and capitalist—and quite practical—demand, but that there could be a socialist version of this. [...] So, are you speaking here about the findings of the historical research that you have done, or referring to what the architects at the time were saying?

AG: This is definitely my own theory, because I'm trying to find the roots of this pre-revolutionary type of the tenement house in the economic determination of the situation.
[...]

MM: So, it's really interesting to reread this kind of statement in light of what what you're saying—this is one of those texts from *Sovrem-*

menaya Arkhitektura: [speaking in Russian] 'At the foundation of all [constructivist] activity is the task of creating architectural condensers of the new social relations, new social factors of our reality'. In this, I understand that the new social condensers reflect the social relations that arise from the transformation of the property relations after the Bolshevik Revolution. I think that this refers to the new relations that arose not necessarily from the development of capitalism in the late nineteenth century but from what happened after 1917, the new property relations and the social relations arising as a result of that.

AG: [...] the understanding of the new society which the Constructivists were ready to present as a new socialist society was not seriously different from any new capitalist society of the same time. The socialist input into this was just a larger amount of space for people, better conditions in the apartments [...] There was no *utopia* in that. There was just functional logic, how could people live in a more comfortable way.

JR: But, for example, our colleague, Victor Buchli, in his book on the Narkomfin, makes the argument that the combination of different kinds of apartment in the transitional social condensers like the Narkomfin isn't just to provide choice. The idea is to provide a transition to Socialism. So, it strikes me that although you could say that the forms are similar to the capitalist ones, the purpose is different.

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AG: I disagree with this. [...] For me, this idea of a transition to 'more socialism' seems rather weak, and I can explain why. First of all, what Ginzburg writes in his book, *Dwelling*, [1934], about the different typology of units, about the idea of the creation of new residential buildings from units of the same type, about how to create individual buildings from typical units, and how to mix different units which have to serve different purposes ... for him, these units are mostly concerned with different family stages. People who were living alone or as a couple could live in unit type F. People with children could live in unit type K. People with more children could live in unit type 2F. That's why, for example, more units of the type 2F were actually constructed than in the initial design of the project. If you look at the second stage of the Narkomfin which is also published in his book, *Dwelling*, you will see that the space of the units was increased, they got big balconies, terraces, and their surface increased from 78 metres for unit type K to some 100 metres! So, where is the transition to socialism? [...]

MM: And then there was the obsession with Fordism, with Taylorism, these kind of things. I suppose it's not surprising, but there are also these kinds of statements. This one is from an editorial piece in 1927, from an editorial in SA. Since Ginzburg was the Editor, he probably wrote the editorials too. In this one, he is talking, once again, about what the new architect is: 'The specific role of the Soviet architect in the creation of the social condensers of our

epoch, a task distinguishing our constructivism from all other left tendencies and groups in Western Europe and America' [speaking Russian]. In other words, what he is saying is that the 'social condenser is that which distinguishes our Soviet Constructivism from that of all these other types of modernism in Western Europe and America'. So, the social condenser is what defines the difference!

AG: Yes, yes, I understand, but [...] look at the situation after World War II in Western Europe which was bombed totally, all over. A huge demand for social housing appeared ... Le Corbusier began to construct his habitats, which were filled [...] with the same ideas as the Narkomfin. A different typology of social housing with different ways of doing small houses for one family, apartment houses with a different typology appears. So, for me it is also a question of economic determinism. In 1920s Russia, there was a huge shortage of modern residences [...] not enough places where people could live [...]. And the problem of constructing these residential houses was, for early Soviet architects, much more important for than for Western architects. [...]

JR: Can I just ask you to go back to the point Victor makes in his book, that in the Narkomfin there were different types of apartments for different types of families. What I thought was different in the Narkomfin than, for example, in a non-socialist country, is the idea that there would be apartments with kitchens, and apartments without kitchens.

AG: This is also a misconception, because all the units in type F were provided with a small kitchenette, not a full kitchen, but a kitchen block with a sliding door—the project is in the book, *Dwelling*. Of course the industry of the Soviet Union at the time could not produce anything like this, that's why they put the gas hobs in. That's why, despite the fact that there was a communal kitchen in the corridor as well, and I recall it very well, there were private gas hobs in the units of type F as well.

MM: Yes, you can see that on the design.

AG: All this was very compact. And the difference between the house commune, Nikolaev's for example, is that modern people could not live there now; but with the Narkomfin modern people can now live there, and after the restoration they will live there in very small, compact, but comfortable units. That's the main difference for me. That's why I disagree with Victor's argument that it was a special kind of residential experiment going towards socialism. I always insist that this was a house, which was oriented for modern people that were quite international, as this style was called, 'International', in the 1930s.
 [...]

AG: And the Socialist input was that the units were small and the public spaces were big. [...] We can see that public space was provided everywhere. That is interesting. The transitional space was not only the sports hall or café or communal block, but the corridors which were called *Straße* (streets) in

Le Corbusier's habitats. You know the most interesting place in the Narkomfin that people usually do not understand [starts drawing]? [...] Look, this is a corridor on the first floor with the entries to the units of type K and, see, there is an open loggia there, which is, in our climate, you can imagine in Moscow, it's for nothing. Like the balconies, people don't use it the whole year. So, the corridor was to get into these apartments, [...] and there were entries from each apartment, each unit of type K, to this open loggia opposite the entry to the apartment. So, you see how private space was mixed and combined with the public space here [...] each apartment had its own entry to the loggia. [...] that is the flexibility of this House that inspires me, for example, it is very rich. I call it a very rich space. [...] Of course all these works were inspired by socialist ideas. But in general it was all directed to a modern understanding of life. That was the main thing. That's why we can use it today. That's very important.

JR: But when Ginzburg is preparing the different designs for the STROIKOM, one of the solutions he comes up with is to reduce the amount of the corridor space, so that you have corridors every two floors, rather than every one, so yes he is making an economic calculation. But the large amount of space that this corridor takes up would suggest that this isn't the most economic solution? So, maybe there is another idea in here, that isn't only economic?

AG: No, not only. Of course the house was done in a very cheap way, but I wouldn't say that all these

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'games' with the space are purely economically inspired.

JR: So, what do you think was the inspiration? Do you think it was more literally about the use of the materials, or innovation in form?

AG: I think there is a straight line to be drawn here from the thoughts that he declared in *Style and Epoch* [1923]. *Style and Epoch* showed Ginzburg's attitude to a kind of cultural process that covered the whole world. The understanding that this is a global process—the understanding of the global impact of the architectural ideas—that was really important. That's why I'm insisting that his attitude, that what he is doing in his works, was oriented to people of modern Europe, to people of a modern age in general.

MM: But there were also the distinctions that he makes between what's happening in Western Europe and America explicitly, and what's happening in the Soviet Union, [...] But when you mentioned that after World War II, for example, in Western Europe [...] in Le Corbusier's *Unité*, but also elsewhere, techniques were being borrowed—ideas and solutions—by Western architects from Constructivist ones. One example of this is the Spa Green Estate, that we're sitting right next to, *here*, designed by Lubetkin who was of course not only inspired by, but he was to some extent one of the Constructivists, at least he was part of that same *milieu*. [...] And it was directly inspired by the Soviet experiments. You had British planners and British architects who were making direct

references to things they had observed or they had learned from the Soviet Union. And in many instances, it was actual Soviet Communist architects, like Lubetkin, who were building the architecture of the welfare state.

JR: You could argue that the laundries and stairwells in some of these buildings were the social condensers that we have been discussing.

AG: Natalya was working on the Narkomfin laundry restoration project. [...] we are trying to use the laundry as a social condenser of our contemporary situation. People ask couldn't you leave the laundry there, wouldn't that be a better idea? It is a brilliant idea, but for certain reasons it is very complicated to do that now. Because this is now a private property, people are not going to deal with this sort of business any more. So the idea is to make a bookstore connected to the café on the ground floor, which introduces both a cultural and a consumerist side in this one building, it also a way to interpret it as a social condenser, but in today's circumstances. [...] We are insisting on the original function for the Narkomfin House itself, but we're proposing an absolutely different function for the laundry.

MM: So, there is a difference between the social condenser in socialist society and a social condenser in capitalist society, you've just admitted it!

JR: (laughs)

AG: Yes, definitely (laughs). Unfortunately, we cannot have free coffee for everyone here,

because all these things belong to separate owners. We are trying to retain it as an ensemble, as a complex, in terms of architecture and heritage, but as a property, it was divided twenty to thirty years ago.

JR: Who owns the complex?

NS: It's divided, all divided. Even the land plot is divided; it's shared by two different parcels.

JR: And are you the architects for all the parcels?

NS: [...] I'm from one side, he is from the other, and we work on it together as a company.

JR: Did you have to compete for the project, or were you given the project?

AG: We had several stages. We made the application, then the client received the building permit (in the UK this is called stage D). So, we made stage D and we are doing working drawings at the moment. But [...] when we were doing stage D, we were not able to get to the whole House, [...] but the property has now been consolidated by the new owner. This is important, because it gives us the possibility to [...] get to spaces where we could not go before.

JR: Who is the new owner?

AG: This is a bank, which is trying not to advertise itself, because they are not a development company. But they are interested in similar projects

like this in London, they even went to look at ISOKON when I told them there is a restored Constructivist building in London [...].

JR: And what about the people who were already living in Narkomfin? Were they tenants, were they living there illegally? I never quite understood the pattern of contemporary occupation.

AG: There are tenants who are living there absolutely legally. Some of them are renting apartments, and some of these apartments are still private property. They have been bought by the bank, because they are interested in consolidating 100% of the property in the House.

MM: Were there no squatters in the Narkomfin?

AG: Squatters, no. For a long time, there have been no squatters.

NS: In the last years, there has been security control at the entry, so it's not possible.

AG: Yes, 15 or 20 years ago, there were squatters.

JR: For the tenants, does the bank have to give them new tenancies?

AG: Most of the apartments now already belong to the bank. So, they are doing renting contracts, short contracts. In times of crisis, they want to make sure the tenants will not break those contracts, so people who live there can continue to live in the newly refurbished building.

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JR: Oh, that's good. And the people who own their own apartments?

AG: I think there are only four of them left. Basically, they are interested in selling them. This is a kind of speculation [...] they are trying to sell their apartments as expensively as possible. The bank is already buying these apartments for more than they would cost on the market.
[...]

JR: Are the buildings listed?

NS: Yes, both of them: they are an ensemble. But the owners of each are not the same.
[...]

NS: The first idea was to demolish it totally and to build a same copy on this plot.

MM: Like the Hotel Moskva.

NS: Maybe, yes, like the Hotel Moskva.

AG: But this doesn't mean demolish in the Russian sense of this word! In Russia, when you demolish a historical building and make a copy, people used to say that this is a restoration.

MM: A Luzhkov-style restoration.

NS: Yes, with the Narkomfin it was a very long story; it took about six years. This House is situated right on the *Sadovoe* ring [Garden Ring] in a very nice space, very attractive, so it might have been possible

to demolish it and to build something even bigger [...]

JR: But that's now not possible. And was that because the government listed it?

AG: Yes, the municipal Department of Historical Preservation had to list it of course.
[...]

JR: And does the listing mean that there must also be the same uses in the building in the future?

AG: We had to leave all of the original parts, as much as possible, not to make compromises at all, etc. But the paradox of restoration is understood very differently in Moscow [...] Our 'restoration' is a very wide term; when I became a restorer as a **practising** architect, I came to understand that there were two main ways of restoring a building: conservation or replica. [...] If we are not able to conserve something for certain reasons which are proved by some laboratory research, or if it's already absent, then we can make a replica. But we don't have official terms to distinguish between replica and restoration. That's why the term is so wide and flexible, and many things could be [...] interpreted as restoration.

JR: So, are you in favour of an approach where things will look the same, but will be built from different materials, or would you try to keep the same materials?

AG: We are trying to keep the same materials. Even in replica we would try to keep the same materials. [...] Now, on to what we are doing in Narkomfin. I can hardly think of a similar case of restoring a Constructivist building. Either doing something like the Planetarium; or with Nikolaev's House Commune, which is a brand new building in the same place (new construction, new details, done in a modern way). This is a mess. [...] It was a government project, and it was of course an attitude. I hope with private money at Narkomfin we will succeed in doing things properly [...]

JR: It's not being turned into a hotel?

AG: No, no. Apartments could be rented or sold. Of course the owners are interested mostly in selling them, because it's helping them get more money back. I hope that they will not be able to do this quickly and that's why we need to rent it. That's why I'm interested in proposing apartments with interiors and obligations not to repair anything, because the subject of restoration should prohibit this. [...]

MM: We've been mostly talking about the Narkomfin and residential architecture. But the social condenser also might manifest itself in things like workers' clubs; Leonidov and others used the term to theorise a new model of collective interaction in public buildings. So, do you think that the social condenser can be understood in the same way in public architecture as in residential architecture, and if not, should there be a different interpretation?

AG: [...] I think there should be a different interpretation, because public buildings like workers' clubs [...] were maybe more socialistically-determined than dwelling [...] With the workers' clubs, they had to find a way to make some public spaces for people who didn't already have the habit of spending their time in public spaces. And now we can find the Royal Festival Hall at the South Bank. Where did it come from? You can say that the Royal Festival Hall is a Melnikov workers' club on a new level!

MM: Although it's used mostly by middle-class people.

JR: Yes, and it has been partly privatised now [...] you can only access parts of the building if you are a member.
[...]

MM: I think it is easier to see the radicalism of the social condenser in the workers' club than in the residence. This is why my interest is more in public buildings, in things like workers' clubs. It is easier to make the transformation. It's trickier to see it in dwelling.
[...]

MM: Interest in modern legacies has become more widespread in the UK and in the US and France and all over the world, as well.

JR: But we are knocking down many of our projects. You know Robin Hood Gardens? The

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Smithsons built their own 'streets in the sky', but English Heritage decided twice to not list the building [...] The land value in London makes it so much more profitable for the developer to knock it down.

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AG: This happens everywhere.

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JR: It is everywhere. So, it's amazing that you are holding on to the Narkomfin.

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AG: The Narkomfin is now too well-known. Maybe 25 years ago, it was in danger, when the first huge commercial interests appeared in Moscow. But now it's something that definitely no one would touch. There were more Constructivist architects working in Moscow, but there are buildings not as

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well-known as the Narkomfin, and they are at much more risk. [...]

AG: While I'm not managing any activity around Constructivism, because we are also running our practice, still we are trying to unite different people and activities now more than before [...] to collect and to combine all these different attempts to study this epoch. [...] So, I'm trying to be this sort of hub or intersection of different people.

JR: A condenser! That's it, you are the social condenser—a human social condenser—Hey, now we get it (laughs)!

AG: Yeah, that's it (laughs)!