

Mélnikov en París, 1925. By Ginés Garrido. Colección arquia/tesis, no. 33. Barcelona: Fundación caja de arquitectos, 2011. 262 pp. Bibliography. Illustrations. Photographs. Figures. Tables. €32.00.

In the opening of his book, which focuses on architect Konstantin Mel'nikov's designs for the Soviet pavilion in Paris and his innovative parking garages and is organized into chapters on "Moscow 1924," "Paris 1925," and "Moscow 1926," Ginés Garrido makes a startling admission: all of the sources cited in his study have been published already. Unlike most monographic studies—and Garrido's is an award-winning dissertation for the Escuela Técnica Superior de Arquitectura de Madrid—this one does not base its achievements solely on bringing to light previously unseen documents. He has assembled an exhaustive bibliography of both primary and secondary publications based on visits to archives in Moscow, New York, Paris, London, and Madrid, has made repeated visits to Russia to view its architectural heritage firsthand, and has included a robust appendix of architectural renderings. Within the context of a book review, it seems fair to ask, what would a study described as such contribute to the growing field of historical studies on Soviet art and architecture?

To fully understand the value of Garrido's work, there are two insights readers need to gain. The first is explained by Garrido himself: "Many of the [previous] studies are missing a deep and detailed analysis of Mel'nikov's work from the perspective of the project and the architectural object" (17). This is where Garrido fills a major void in the study of Soviet architecture and of Mel'nikov's work in particular. He is meticulous in his attention to Mel'nikov's preliminary drawings and architectural plans, studying them comparatively, examining previous scholars' conclusions, and expertly correcting the historical record when he sees discrepancies between the architect's documentation and the analysis of those records made by architectural historians. His insights are especially illuminating when it comes to comparing Mel'nikov's sketches for the pavilion, the photographic documentation of the built structure, and the architectural plans drafted by the local Charpentiers de Paris for the building's execution in wood on the fairgrounds. In paying close attention to the architectural record, Garrido details for his readers the process behind Mel'nikov's constructions as well as the innovations built into his structures. This allows Garrido to provide an extensive analysis of Mel'nikov's pavilion and to draw important comparisons between his work and that of the other architects who submitted plans for the competition, as well as those who, like Aleksandr Rodchenko, contributed other work for the Soviet displays at the 1925 exhibition.

The other part of Garrido's thesis is dedicated to Mel'nikov's design of parking garages, which he argues has been previously underestimated in the scholarship on Soviet and European architecture. Following a survey of the importance of car

culture to the avant-garde, including a detailed discussion of Le Corbusier, Garrido makes a phenomenal observation, one that seems to go directly against the grain of current scholarly attention to speed as the dominant symbol of modernist innovation: “Mel’nikov did not share in the formal metaphors or ideological significance that the avant-garde attributed to the automobile; his parking garages were guided by the ‘clumsy’ movement, at low speed, characteristic of cars, and by the space they needed” (183). Thus, rather than see this as a sign of moderation or reaction in Mel’nikov, Garrido interprets it as the architect’s key contribution to the study and design of the garage as a typology. Through Garrido’s close attention to Mel’nikov’s architectural plans, and his resistance to received ideas about the avant-garde, readers come to appreciate Mel’nikov’s contributions to twentieth-century architecture beyond the high-profile 1925 pavilion. We also learn, by Garrido’s example, the redeeming value of specialized knowledge, close readings, and comparative analysis.

This brings me to the second insight that English- and Russian-language scholars need in order to appreciate this monograph: Ginés Garrido is an award-winning architect in his own right (see his work at www.burgos-garrido.com/principal.php [last accessed 15 September 2013]). We are therefore reading a reevaluation of a major Soviet architect undertaken by a contemporary architect-scholar, one who has made the study of the historical avant-garde a foundation for his own innovative practice. Garrido was part of the team responsible for Madrid RIO, an ambitious plan to transform the M30 ring motorway by moving the traffic pattern underground and transforming the aboveground into an eighty-hectare multiuse urban development for the public. After reading Garrido’s study of Mel’nikov’s innovative designs for parking garages, and considering his own role in revolutionizing traffic patterns and public space in Madrid, I came away from this monograph with renewed interest in and attention to the necessary connections between history and innovation, innovation and use, scholarship and design.

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