

Bringing history home

Gachot brings story of Russian architect back to appreciative St. Petersburg audiences

by Brian Sattler

Richard Gachot remembers his grandfather showing him beautiful pictures when he was a boy. Those images, and the stories behind them, helped ignite his passion for art and design, a passion lived out in his career and studies in architecture and interior design. Now that passion has led to a history that expands Russians' knowledge of one of their premier architects.

"I was born in New York," Gachot said, "but my mother is Russian. I became interested in architecture when I was a child. A collection of my grandfather's pictures included the outstanding Russian artist, architect and civil engineer Nikolai Vassiliev, and that left an indelible impression on me."

"Vassiliev became my grandfather's teacher and mentor," Gachot said. "I often visited my grandfather in the studio, saw his drawings and architectural designs. That all strongly influenced, of course, the choice of my profession. Now I teach design and architectural history."

Gachot is program director of interior design in the Department of Family and Consumer Sciences. He earned a

bachelor of arts degree from Denison University in Granville, Ohio, a master of architecture from Columbia University and a master of arts in architectural history from the University of Texas, where he is now completing his doctor of philosophy in architectural history. In addition, he has studied in Paris at the Sorbonne and the Ecole de Beaux-Arts.

But it wasn't until recently that Gachot realized that the part of the story that he knew was lost to the people of Russia.

"I felt that to honor the memory of my grandfather I should write a book about his friend and mentor, one of the outstanding architects of the first half of the 20th century, a graduate of the Institute of Civil Engineering, St. Petersburg architect Nikolai Vassiliev, whose drawings were passed to me by inheritance after the death of my grandfather."

Gachot's grandfather, Boris Riaboff, was also a graduate of the Institute of Civil Engineering and immigrated to America in 1922. Being younger than Vassiliev, he was able to graduate from the University of Pennsylvania and eventually received an architectural license in the U.S., a transition the talented, but considerably older, Vassiliev was unable to make.

Vassiliev lived to be 83, and his last place of service was the New York City Planning Commission, Gachot said. He lived in New York for 35 years, longer than his time in St. Petersburg, but the radically different methods of architectural production in the U.S. in the 1920s to 1940s kept him from contributing at anywhere near the scale of his work in Russia. Starting with the design of residences for friends, Vassiliev continued his career with Warren and Wetmore, a leading Beaux-arts architectural firm in New York, where he developed projects for major hotels and the famous Park Avenue midtown skyscraper, the New York Central Building, just behind their previous masterpiece, Grand Central Station. Among his own works were competitive designs for the Chicago Tribune building, a villa in France for opera singer Feodor Chaliapin, a New York residence for émigré artist Victor de Tchetchet, skyscraper designs, as well as urban planning schemes for NYC.

"It was a tragic situation in the sense that this man built major buildings in St. Petersburg, but, when he came here, his career never reached those heights again," Gachot said. Vassiliev and Gachot's grandfather met in Sea Cliff, a popular summer vacation destination for New York's Russian émigré community. Both were graduates of the same St. Petersburg architectural school, and their friendship grew strong, eventually collaborating on several projects.

Gachot's new book Nikolai Vassiliev, from Art Nouveau to Modernism, is the result of painstaking research in a collaborative effort between Gachot and Russian architecture historian Vladimir Lisovski, doctor of arts, professor of the Academy of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg.

The book, published in Russian, is the first detailed account of Vassiliev's period of immigration to America and introduces a number of architectural and graphic works through documents and illustrations published for the first time. "Russians know little about the 300 or more émigré architects that came to America during the Russian revolution," Gachot said. "They are trying to piece together their history and understand the massive brain drain that occurred after the October revolution when the artists went to Paris and the architects went to New York."

Vassiliev holds a pride of place among Russia's premier architects from the period before the Soviet revolution. Brilliant graphics and architectural talent cemented his reputation as the most talented of the masters of the "Northern Modern" movement of Art Nouveau, a style that largely determined the identity of St. Petersburg art and architecture in the early 20th century. The architect designed opulent homes, the Friday Mosque next to the Peter and Paul Fortress, the New Passage in St Petersburg, the German drama theater and the house of Luther in Tallinn, as well as numerous original projects that were notable milestones in the history of residential and commercial modern architecture.

This tremendous period of Vassiliev's work in St. Petersburg is clearly disclosed in the portion of the book written by Lisovski. The second, longer period of Vassiliev's life was, until recently, unknown in Russia. Now, thanks to Gachot's research, and decision to publish his work in Russian, the rest of the story is known. Gachot's work shows the fruitful creative work of Nikolai Vassiliev in the United States,

where the architect lived in exile for three-and-a-half decades.

After the book was published, Gachot traveled to Russia and participated in a book tour that included book signings, lectures and tours of many of the works of Vassiliev.

"We gave the first lecture at the Singer House, known as the House of Books, a wonderful Art Nouveau building originally built for the Singer Sewing Machine Company, but converted to St. Petersburg's largest bookstore in 1919," Gachot said. "It is an incredible place. Later we presented at the St. Petersburg House of Architect, a beautiful mansion near the Fabergé Company, home of the Petersburg Society of Architects. Finally I was invited to go to the Institute of Architecture and Civil Engineers," Gachot said. "That was very touching for me because my grandfather, my great uncle and Vassiliev all graduated from there."

Gachot accepted an invitation to return to the institute in the spring to lecture to its students and faculty. On March 13, he delivered a lecture on three major influences in the development of modern American architecture: the discovery of Constructivism and the Russian avant-garde, the "culture of congestion" inspired by architect Rem Koolhaas' book *Delirious New York*, and the idiosyncrasies of the capitalist economic system. The following day, his lecture was more personal as he told "a tale of two architects," sharing the American experience of two graduates of the institute, Nicholas Vassiliev and his grandfather, Boris Riaboff.

"The world has changed so much since they graduated, but I realized after my first lecture that little has changed within these walls," Gachot said. "The questions I received from enthusiastic students, the energy I felt in the halls and the high level of work I saw in the studios all reassured me that the university continues to produce students as gifted and talented as Vassiliev and Riaboff."

From left, Vera Kasyanchik, translator and editor for publishing house Dom "Kolo;" Richard Gachot; Vladimir Grigorovich Lisovsky, architectural historian, professor at St. Petersburg Academy of Fine Arts; and Anton Voznesensky, director and publisher of Dom "Kolo" Editions, at the St. Petersburg House of Architects (Dom Arkhitektur) for the opening lecture on Vassiliev Book to the Society of Petersburg Architects.



In gratitude for the opportunity to share, Gachot presented two renderings by Vassiliev to the institute. "I often saw these pictures and others in my grandfather's studio when I was growing up," he said. "I cherish them. Nevertheless, it was a pleasure to donate the two renderings from the 1933 Chicago World's Fair to the institute."

"I believe cultural exchanges like this will serve to strengthen the relationship between Russia and America," Gachot said.