

# A Hotel, a Filmmaker and Angry Locals

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A view of the construction site for film director Nikita Mikhalkov's hotel on Maly Kozikhinsky Pereulok on Nov. 11. **Vladimir Filonov**

Clashes with police, scuffles at a construction site, sieges of administration buildings and a fire that some believe was arson.

These are things residents of a downtown Moscow neighborhood had to deal with after an Oscar-winning director decided to build a hotel next to their homes.

“Some people have threatened us verbally over the telephone. Are they going to shoot us soon or what?” said Yelena Tkach, a member of the preservationist Public Coalition to Defend Moscow, which supports the locals in their fight.

Residents of Maly Kozikhinsky Pereulok, a mix of upper middle class and artistic retirees, say the construction is destroying their own houses. So far, they are fighting a losing battle against the company of Nikita Mikhalkov, a film director and friend of Prime Minister Vladimir Putin.

The construction, which has been in the planning stages for years, was finally started in June with the razing of a 19th-century building that housed Mikhalkov's own Trite studio. The building is to be replaced by a seven-story hotel and a two-story underground parking garage.

Local residents said extensive underground works are damaging their own apartment buildings, causing foundations to crack. They also complain that the project was initiated without their consent.

Architectural preservationists, increasingly desperate over the rampant remodeling of Moscow in recent years, said the planned building, which is three stories higher than the one it is replacing, will not fit the architectural layout of the neighborhood and will simply stick out like a sore thumb.

But although the residents have campaigned for months and have the media on their side, neither officials nor developers — including Mikhalkov himself — have found any fault with the project.

Marina Yanchevetskaya, 62, who lives on Maly Kozikhinsky just across the construction site in an apartment inherited from her grandfather, famous Soviet-era historical novelist Vasily Yan, said the works have already left cracks on the walls in her bathroom.

"I am tired of fighting. I know that we wouldn't be able to achieve anything," she said, wearily.

Her pessimism has its reasons. On Dec. 6, a fire flared in her apartment building, covering an area of 70,000 square meters. The officials refused to open a criminal case, blaming the blaze on an electric circuit, but some of the residents insist that it was arson.

"When big money and the interests of citizens clash with each other, a residential building is set on fire," Yanchevetskaya's neighbor Alexander Pleshakov told *The Moscow Times* with a tinge of bitter irony in his voice.

"People who live in this area are losing not just peace of mind, but also a serious amount of money," said another resident, Yelena Lobachevskaya.

Apartments in pre-revolutionary buildings on the street fetch up to \$9,000 per square meter, but prices can drop up to 20 percent if the buildings' foundations are damaged as the residents fear they will be, said Alexander Ziminsky, head of the Penny Lane real estate agency's elite property department.

Residents clashed with construction workers several times in October, trying to stop the work, and petitioned City Hall and even President Dmitry Medvedev, who has not reacted. Construction was put on hold Oct. 27 but resumed in November.

Mikhalkov said he sees no reason to halt construction because it has all necessary clearance.

He visited former Mayor Yury Luzhkov "almost 12 times" in order to obtain signatures for all paperwork concerning the project, Mikhalkov said in an interview with *Izvestia* earlier this month.

"I am really concerned about the architectural face of Moscow. ... In the end, everything was done for the hotel to become part of the Moscow's architectural tradition," he said.

Current Mayor Sergei Sobyanin has kept silent about the conflict so far.

A spokeswoman for developer Bel Development denied in a statement to The Moscow Times all allegations about hazards caused by the project, which will cost about \$20 million to build.

"The construction in Maly Kozikhinsky Pereulok is not threatening surrounding buildings and will be continued," said the company, formerly controlled by Oleg Deripaska's Basic Element and now listing the Cyprus-based WTT Hotels One Limited as owner.

Bel Development said several examinations confirmed that the project posed no danger. Among the checks cited by the company was a ruling by the Moscow State Non-Departmental Expertise watchdog, which preservationists said actually contained no conclusion on the project's safety and only stated that wooden ceiling beams in nearby buildings have been replaced by concrete ones.

The company also kept quiet on another accusation by residents: that they were not informed about public hearings on the project in April 2008, which were attended by only six people.

"Nobody has informed us about the hearings," Yanchevetskaya said.

A copy of the protocol of the public hearing, obtained by The Moscow Times through the preservationists, contains no signatures of residents and does not list their names.

The protesters have got a celebrity on their side, with the actress Tatyana Dogileva, who lives on the nearby Tryokhprudny Pereulok, joining the protests. But even that did not help.

"I am living a quiet life and not trying to put my nose anywhere. But now I am not just in shock, I am devastated," Dogileva told The Moscow Times just before she and some 20 other protesters were whisked away by the police from the office of the prefect of Moscow's Central Administrative District, Sergei Baidakov, earlier this month.

Baidakov made an appointment with the protesters but refused to meet them, and when they stormed into his office, police threw them out. Baidakov gave no explanation for his refusal but told reporters later that a new independent commission would conduct a check into the project — while the construction goes on.

Political activists have also lent a hand, with the head of the Left Front opposition group, Sergei Udaltsov, rallying against the construction until his incarceration last week at a protest rally. "If authorities do not pay attention to that situation, the problem might get into the political level," he told The Moscow Times in an interview before his arrest.

Roman Tkach, a local resident and a member of the Public Coalition for Defense of Moscow, said the activists planned to sue the developers but doubted it would help.

"Before we win any court case, they will already have built a hotel," he said.

There is an overall lack of hotels in Moscow, and a new one could be welcome news to visitors.

Moscow is also experiencing problems with apartment hotels of the kind being built in Maly Kozikhinsky Pereulok. Research by the real estate consulting company Blackwood this year indicated that only 1,500 of the city's hotel suites, or 5 percent of the total, are available for long-term lease.

Residents began to lower their demands recently, saying they would approve the construction if the developers abandoned the underground garage, which they consider the most dangerous part of the project.

“We are not saying that they shouldn't build the hotel. We want them to hear us,” Tkach said.

But Bel Development has not commented on a possible compromise.

Locals see Mikhalkov's political connections as the source of the problem, saying his friendship with the authorities has turned him into an untouchable figure.

“He probably thinks that he is some sort of god,” said Marina Ozhiganova, a public activist and a resident of the nearby Patriarch's Ponds area.

Mikhalkov, who in 1994 won a best foreign film Oscar for his "Burnt by the Sun" tragedy, set in times of Stalin's terror, made a documentary to congratulate Putin on his 55th birthday in 2007 and penned a political manifesto in October, advocating for stronger presidential powers and abolishment of direct mayoral elections.

Yanchevetskaya, the local resident, said she has changed her opinion about Mikhalkov after the hotel dispute. “I've nothing against him as an actor and director, but he is a disgusting person,” she said.

Yanchevetskaya recalled how Mikhalkov visited her apartment in the early 2000s to film an interview with her father, architect Mikhail Yanchevetsky, for the documentary “Russians Without Russia” on emigrants exiled from their homes by the Bolshevik Revolution.

“That time he said many good things about our family. I would like to look him in the eyes now,” she said.

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