

Demolition Wrecks Permits for All

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Moscow's cultural heritage agency is taking decisive action after the illegal destruction of this building's facade.

Moscow authorities canceled all previously issued permits for demolition or partial dismantling of structures in areas containing historic buildings, in response to the illegal demolition of the Kolbe house on Bolshaya Yakimanka Ulitsa by Capital Group developers.

Moskomnaslediye, the city department responsible for protecting cultural heritage, said in a statement late last week: "All approvals, permits, approved projects, including the complete or partial dismantling of any buildings — including those having and not having any historical-cultural status — in combined protected zones or zones of strict construction regulation by the city of Moscow are now considered null and void without re-approval of the department of cultural heritage."

The city committee cited decrees from December 1995 and December 2004 as the legal basis for its decision.

"The developer of the project [on Yakimanka], Capital Group, knew about these rules, since the question of removing the building was submitted to the commission March 15, 2005, after which the company's demolition request was denied. Letters allegedly received from some former employees of Moskomnaslediye authorizing the demolition of these buildings have no legal force," the agency said.

Statements by the developer that the facade wall of the building fell on its own due to its natural lack of structural integrity do not hold water, Moskomnaslediye said.

Nikolai Pereslegin, an adviser to the head of Moskomnaslediye, said this case was a precedent for the city, being the first time a development company openly ignored the position of an officially authorized state body.

"After this, we do not see the developers as a civilized and law-abiding company, and so the city is drawing its own conclusions about that organization," Pereslegin said.

Stimulated by the situation with the building on Yakimanka Ulitsa, the civic movement Arkhnadzor last week asked Mayor Sergei Sobyanin to suspend documents issued under the previous city administration headed by Yury Luzhkov, in order to avoid the demolition of historic buildings of the city.

Capital Group maintains the legality of its work on the project. It said the building was declared hazardous and not a historical landmark in 2005. The Emergency Situations Ministry issued a conformation on the need for demolition of the building, Capital Group said.

"If an investor can get away with inexpensive fines, if new office buildings sprout up on Yakimanka Ulitsa as if nothing had happened, then this becomes a benchmark for all other investors who derive huge profits from central Moscow real estate and signals that anything can be done in the city. In spite of statements made by the new administration on halting construction in the historic center, developers will continue to tear down historic Moscow," Arkhnadzor said.

Pereslegin said the government will initiate legal proceedings against the company. On June 1, Moskomnaslediye intends to launch a hotline where citizens can provide information about cases of demolition or destruction of historic buildings.

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