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New Holland Island Set for Big Makeover

By Shura Collinson

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Cultural renovation is one possible outcome of the development of New Holland Island. Here, the Northern Capital's other islands appearing under faint sun. **Graham Racher**

ST. PETERSBURG — Architectural projects for the redevelopment of New Holland Island in St. Petersburg are now on show as the island opened to the public for the first time in its 300-year history.

All eight of the design entries, which are now on show to the public at the branch of the Central Naval Museum on the Kryukov Canal, envisage the emergence of the historic island, which was used as a timber-drying facility in the 18th century and later used to test new ship designs, as a new cultural hub of the city.

Four projects have been shortlisted, whose visions include the formal naval prison on the island being transformed into a hotel, the presence of a hot-air balloon as a viewing platform, and the creation of a new city park.

All include the preservation of the island's distinctive 18th-century brick warehouses, which

was part of the terms of the tender.

Under a project by the Russian architecture firm Studio 44, the warehouses would be turned into 50 "flexible boxes" that could be used for a variety of purposes.

"You can play with them like building bricks; they could be transformed into spaces for theater, art, cinema, lofts, studios, even stores," said Nikita Yavein, an architect with Studio 44 and a former chief architect of St. Petersburg.

"New Holland is a place where people can — and should — ice-skate in the winter and relax in the summer," he said.

Instead of constructing a new building on the island, Studio 44, whose previous projects include the city's Ladozhsky Station, proposes planting a park there in tribute to the Petrine-era tradition of growing trees on the site to provide timber for shipbuilding.

"We would create a Korobelny Grove like that existing under Peter [the Great]," Yavein said. "For us, a park is the greatest luxury in a city; it is dearer than anything else."

Studio 44's project also envisages the creation of a new city square, Triangular Square.

"Triangular Square will be a theatrical area, something that the city currently lacks," Yavein said. "It will be the counterbalance to Palace Square, the engine that attracts people."

Yavein said it was too early to talk about the potential cost of the project. "This is just an algorithm; it could be made out of gold, or out of steel," he said.

The U.S. firm WORKac, whose project has also been shortlisted, has experience of working in Russia, having designed two stores in Moscow for fashion designer Diane von Furstenberg.

WORKac's vision includes the formation of an artificial hill to create an amphitheater, from which a hot-air balloon would be tethered, offering views over the historic center of the city.

"We want to minimize the new; there's already so much that you can inhabit in a new way," said Amale Andraos, who founded WORKac together with Dan Wood.

"We really wanted to use the existing warehouses and bring new life to them, so in the winter the park becomes an interior park, connecting all of the warehouses," she said.

"We also propose to open up some of the warehouses to create bigger spaces for various programs, such as film, an art school, a market. Rather than adding, we feel we could just remove enough in order to be able to occupy the warehouses in a new and exciting way," Andraos said.

"It's just the concept stage; the idea was to generate ideas, to fantasize," Wood said.

"The preservation of these buildings is going to be a major expense," he added.

The other two firms to have made the shortlist are the Dutch firm MVRDV, whose project would see the warehouses gradually restored and upgraded, housing temporary galleries or artists' studios in the meantime, and under whom the entire island would become a

“curatable space;” and David Chipperfield Architects (Britain/Germany), who envisage the warehouses being turned into retail and office space, as well as residential real estate, and the former naval prison being turned into a hotel.

The winning project will be announced at the beginning of August, but will not necessarily be implemented brick for brick on New Holland.

“These are just concepts; they’re not necessarily what the island will look like in the future,” said John Mann, director of the information policy department at Millhouse, the parent company of New Holland Development, or NHD, that is financing the island’s development. “Once a winner is declared at the beginning of August, the project may well be amended,” he said.

The Iris Foundation, which is acting as creative consultant to NHD, will decide on the winner, together with an expert commission that includes Mikhail Piotrovsky, director of the State Hermitage Museum.

The final project must also be approved by the Federal Service for the Protection of Cultural Heritage, said Studio 44’s Yavein.

New Holland Development, whose parent company Millhouse is owned by billionaire Roman Abramovich, won a tender held by City Hall last November to redevelop New Holland, committing to invest at least 12 billion rubles ($427 million) over a construction period of seven years.

The Iris Foundation is a non-profit organization devoted to contemporary culture that was set up by Abramovich’s girlfriend, Daria Zhukova. Previous projects developed by Zhukova’s Iris Foundation include the Garage contemporary arts space in Moscow.

New Holland was given over to the city by the Defense Ministry in 2004, having been a closed military facility throughout both its imperial and Soviet history. The first tender for its redevelopment was won by Moscow developer Shalva Chigirinsky’s ST Novaya Gollandia company in February 2006 with a design by British architect Norman Foster. The $320 million project, which was to include three hotels, a Palace of Festivals and outdoor amphitheater, stalled in 2008 and was abandoned for good in March last year when City Hall terminated the investor’s contract due to internal deadline violations reportedly arising from a lack of funds. Construction of the project was never begun, although preparation work was carried out and several buildings were demolished.

“We are starting completely from scratch,” Mann said. “The previous project was not popular with local residents.”

NHD does not foresee problems with funding of the kind encountered by the previous investor. “That’s not a problem we generally have,” Mann said.

“We have seven years to complete the development, and we are seven months into that time period. I think it’s not unlikely that some parts will open before others,” he added.

“New Ideas for New Holland” runs through July 30 at the Central Naval Museum on the

Kryukov Canal. www.newholland.sp.com

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