

Foreign Architects Build Up Cachet

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Pedestrians walking in front of Capital Group's Legenda Tsvetnogo complex, which was developed with foreign architects. Their presence is rankling Russian ones. **Vladimir Filonov**

Foreign architects have become a profitable marketing brand in Russia, and their domestic counterparts are raising concerns about preferential treatment they receive and the poor quality of some of their work.

"The way that our market is organized can't be classified as anything but mad," said Andrei Bokov, president of the Russian Union of Architects. "No country in the world lets in foreigners the way we do."

Experts have noted significant growth in the number of foreign architects in the country in the past three to four years.

The involvement of foreign architects has become an effective marketing strategy for developers. A famous name is a big draw for customers, but even with the less-known architects, customers expect that foreigners will design better quality housing.

"The involvement of a foreign team becomes an integral part of the marketing of the project," said Anna Dvurechenskaya, senior consultant at Cushman & Wakefield. "It tells clients that this is a quality project."

The demand for projects that involve foreign architects is particularly strong in the residential sector because foreigners are seen to have more experience in designing comfortable and ecological homes, Dvurechenskaya said.

All properties in the Capital Group Legenda Tsvetnogo commercial development, developed with foreign architects, got letters of intent within half a year after being put on the market, said Dinara Lizunova, head of the communications department at Capital Group.

The higher salaries for foreign architects can be compensated for by raising property prices. The better quality, foreign-designed properties can cost up to 20 percent more, Lizunova said.

"It is difficult to put a concrete measure on the influence of architecture and design on the speediness of the sales or the final cost of square meters, but it is clear that for real estate in the deluxe category this is a key component that influences market demand," Lizunova said.

The surge of foreign architects into the country has left the Russians struggling to keep up.

Sergei Gnedovsky, vice president of the Union of Architects, said it is difficult for Russian architects to compete for projects because competition rules require developers to pay up to 30 percent of the cost of the project in advance, which Russian firms can't manage.

Domestic architects also noted that some foreigners don't know how to work in the Russian landscape, which leads to poor quality work.

Gnedovsky said foreign architects designed their project in Sochi without consideration of the local ecology. In this case — as well as with the design of a football arena by Japanese architects in St. Petersburg — Russians had to step in to fix the mistakes, he said.

"You can't complain about a mistake in a project," Bokov said. "All the foreigners have left, and we have to deal with the mess."

The Union of Architects will draft a new law on architecture in September to present to the State Duma that they hope will promote freer competition between local and foreign architects.

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