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New Chief Architect Well-Grounded in History

By Irina Filatova

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Kuznetsov faces the challenge of building a rapport with city authorities.

As he headed to a meeting with deputy mayor Marat Khusnullin earlier this month, Sergei Kuznetsov, owner of a Moscow-based architecture firm, wasn't thinking life would change for him completely after that conversation.

But two weeks later, Kuznetsov was introduced at City Hall as the new chief architect of Moscow, an appointment that has been met with mixed reactions from the professional community.

"The proposal was absolutely unexpected," Kuznetsov said at a meeting with journalists last week. "I got a call from the secretariat of Marat Khusnullin and was invited to talk. I had no idea what the conversation would be about."

Kuznetsov — who co-owns architectural bureau SPEECH Tchoban & Kuznetsov with architect

Sergei Tchoban — said that, like many people, he used to have preconceptions about how government officials are appointed.

"I wasn't used to such decisions by authorities, that a person, who is not being lobbied by anyone, could be appointed to such a position ... It seemed to me that it just can't happen," he said, adding that he had been selected from a pool of candidates.

Kuznetsov took over from Alexander Kuzmin, who abruptly filed for resignation last month after 16 years in office.

Explaining City Hall's choice, Mayor Sergei Sobyanin, who introduced Kuznetsov, 35, at a meeting of the Moscow government early last week, referred to his vast experience and described him as "a well-known person in the architectural community, despite his young age."

One of his teachers remembers Kuznetsov, a graduate of the Moscow Institute of Architecture, as a promising student who was neat and never missed deadlines.

"I never had any issues with him and he never delayed submitting his projects," said Natalya Dushkina, a professor with the Moscow Institute of Architecture, who oversaw Kuznetsov's term project during one of his last years at the university in the late 1990s.

Kuznetsov stood out among other students, having founded his own architecture firm, which Dushkina said demonstrated his independence and ambitiousness.

"Many students work at architectural studios — it's not surprising — but very few set up their own business," she said by telephone.

Kuznetsov's colleagues said his name has become known over the last few years thanks to big projects in which his firm participated, including VTB's office in Moscow-City; one of the districts at Skolkovo innovation hub; the media center in Sochi that will accommodate journalists covering the 2014 Olympics; and The Museum of Architectural Graphics in Berlin.

But some said that Kuznetsov has yet to gain authority among the city's architectural community and Muscovites.

"A high-ranking position like the city's chief architect requires experience and good contacts among authorities and the architectural community. I don't see that Kuznetsov has them," said Boris Uborevich-Borovsky, chairman of Moscow Architectural Community, an informal association of the city's architects.

His youth is "a colossal advantage," agreed Dushkina, "but it will be hard for him to move forward without uniting the expert community around him."

Uborevich-Borovsky speculated that the city authorities are placing their bets on a new person who lacks any connection to the previous administration.

Kuznetsov's predecessor, Kuzmin, was one of just a few senior officials still serving in the city administration after the resignation of ousted mayor Yury Luzhkov.

The major challenge facing the new chief architect is to build a rapport with city authorities, said Vladimir Plotkin, head of design firm Reserve.

"It's not easy for a creative person to transform into a high-ranking official. It's a big challenge," he said by telephone.

Plotkin, who has worked on a few projects with Kuznetsov, praised his "creativity and managerial skills," adding that the new chief architect should also demonstrate flexibility and the ability to compromise but be able to defend his own point of view at the same time.

Kuznetsov said at Thursday's meeting that he had weighed all the pros and cons before making the decision, adding that he would stay away from design work and managing his company SPEECH, as the current law forbids officials from doing business.

"It's impossible to serve two gods," he said, adding that he would focus his work on the city's image, with big projects like development of the territory of Krasny Oktyabr on Bersenyevskaya Embankment among his priorities.

The new chief architect will apparently have a better chance to apply his creativity than his predecessor, who also chaired City Hall's Architecture Committee, a position that involves more technical work.

City Hall decided to split these two functions, with Sobyanin saying that the chief architect should be in charge of creative issues, while the committee chairman will oversee administration and management of construction.

The functions of the chief architect will include reviewing and approving city construction projects and working with the expert community to "come up with consolidated solutions to complicated, problematic issues," Sobyanin said at last week's meeting.

City Hall will refine the roles and responsibilities of the newly divided positions over the next few weeks.

Kuznetsov pointed out that Moscow has many problems, like bad traffic, poor quality of life and a lack of well-designed buildings, adding, however, that it would take at least 10 years for the first signs of improvement to appear, while turning it into a "fashionable city comfortable for living" could require up to 20 years.

One big problem Kuznetsov will have to face is preserving the city's historical heritage — a well-known weak point of Luzhkov's administration, said Dushkina, who is also member of the International Council on Monuments and Sites.

"He's receiving the city in very bad condition," she said, adding that expanding business is likely to continue to put pressure on Moscow's historical center.

Dushkina, who oversaw Kuznetsov's term project on preparations for the 100th anniversary in 1998 of architectural historian Nikolai Brunov, said there is hope that he will manage, as he "has maintained a feeling for historical times."

But in order for real changes to happen, creating a competitive environment for architects is

crucial, Uborevich-Borovsky of Moscow Architectural Community said, adding that tenders should be announced to pick designers for the city's biggest projects, who are now chosen by either investors or City Hall.

"If Kuznetsov introduces the tender system for the city's major projects, Moscow will change," he said.

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