The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Railway Stations to Get Movie Theaters

By Lena Smirnova

November 25, 2012



Violinist Yury Bashmet receiving flowers from Yakunin after a concert at Moscow's Kazansky Station on Saturday. **Vladimir Filonov**

Russian Railways is giving its transportation hubs a glitzy makeover, with 40 movie theaters set to be created near train stations in the near future.

These theaters are meant to restore the image of railroad stations as cities' cultural centers, Sergei Abramov, head of Russian Railways stations department, said late last week.

The state-owned corporation is looking into the possibility of opening theaters at stations in Nizhny Novgorod, Ulyanovsk, Stavropol, Smolensk and Tver, among others.

Moscow's Kazansky station will be the first to get its own movie theater — perhaps to add to its cultural track-record, which already includes hosting a Jean Paul Gaultier fashion show in 2010. The theater is slated to open next year and will have between two and four screens. Russian Railways is now selecting a private investor for the project.

This initiative is part of the rail monopoly's larger program to modernize railroad stations and make them into full-service leisure complexes by 2015. Other planned developments include setting up malls, restaurants, children's play areas and wireless Internet access.

Russian Railways is trying to attract large operators and private investors to carry out these projects.

Private investments into the development of railroad stations came to 5 billion rubles ($160 million) in 2012, Abramov said. The corporation hopes to raise 10 to 30 billion in such investments next year.

Setting up shops and restaurants near railroad stations could be lucrative because of the high traffic in these areas, experts said. The shopping malls already working next to Moscow's stations, such as Evropeisky next to Kievsky station and Atrium next to Kursky station, have good customer flow and low turnover of retailers.

A retail hub set up by a railroad station may draw in some train passengers, particularly those who are traveling to Moscow for the first time, said Pavel Tiger, director of the real estate investment department at Third Rome consulting company. Unlike busy Muscovites, these passengers might come to the station two to three hours in advance and go shopping for things that they can't find in the regions.

Tiger said that he would also recommend that investors set up restaurants, souvenir shops and bars near train stations.

"The average Russian man has this mentality that he has to go into the train a little bit 'warmed up,'" Tiger said, referring to the last of his three recommendations.

Alexander Obukhovsky, head of the retail real estate department at Knight Frank, agreed that food facilities and small multimedia stores or Internet cafes would do well around stations. But he said movie theaters are the least likely of the proposed options to benefit from being near a transportation hub.

"Many people that spend more than two hours at the railroad station do so out of necessity and have limited means," Obukhovsky said. "That is, transit passengers won't create additional traffic to the movie theater."

Rather, the theaters would likely be popular because of the general high traffic of the area, he added.

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