

Attempting to Make Moscow a Good Place to Live

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Moscow has a large number of long-term problems. Pollution is just one. **Vladimir Filonov**

Is Moscow a good place to live in? For the organizers of the exhibition "Gorod dla lyudei" (A City for People), bloggers Ilya Varlamov and Maksim Katz, the answer is no.

"Moscow authorities seem to have their priorities upside down," said Varlamov, author of a popular blog on urban planning and what he sees as the banes of Moscow life. "They cater to the needs of developers and advertising agencies rather than to those of the average Muscovite."

"The lack of social and green spaces means that hardly anyone wants to spend time on the street," he added. "We just rush from our door to the metro. Looking at those who actually stay outside, one could think Moscow is a city of alcoholics."

Moscow's bad points, the pair say, include ubiquitous cars, an underdeveloped public

transport network, and neglected or unsafe public spaces.

The exhibit is just part of a new wave of attempts led by activists like Varlamov and Katz to fix a city that many say has become uninhabitable.

A series of posters compared Moscow with various Western European cities, focusing on transportation, courtyards and playgrounds, green spaces and public facilities. "Visual pollution," or chaotic advertising cluttering city vistas, is a major theme.

As well as showing the capital's more notorious eyesores, the exhibit featured infographics showing Muscovites' answers to related survey questions. According to one of them, only 17 percent of the capital's inhabitants would consider using a public toilet. Over 70 percent said they would do so if facilities were "on a European level."

Co-organizer Maksim Katz says the problem is not about money. "No riches are needed to change this," the blogger said. "I have seen pleasant, inviting cities in developing countries, like Santiago de Cuba, as well as frustrating urban behemoths in the U.S. — take Los Angeles. What we need is a plan, more communication and more responsive authorities."

Varlamov and Katz are already devising some plans of their own. Under the umbrella of the organization Gorodskiye Proekty (Urban Projects), they have been carrying out research on improving the quality of life in the Shchukino region of Moscow, as well as the main thoroughfare, Tverskaya.

"Tverskaya is in a sorry state," Katz said. "It is one huge parking lot."

According to the pair, the problem is not limited to the main street. Many posters dwell on the lack of parking spaces and disruptions caused by motor traffic in the city center. Suggested solutions include investment in a tram network and raising parking fees.

One infographic accused the government of spending nearly 10 times more money "per driver" (i.e. on the development of road networks) than "per passenger" (on the development of public transport infrastructure), while claiming that just 20 percent of Muscovites drive regularly.

One visitor described this approach as simplistic. "To me, it is manipulation," he said, refusing to give his name. "Firstly, it completely overlooks the excise duties that exist in this country. Secondly, we should not forget that car owners probably contribute the lion's share in taxes to the city budget."

See vk.com/cityprojects for more about Varlamov and Katz project.

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