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Idealists Eye Blossoming Art Hub in Moscow

By Lena Smirnova

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The tunnel that leads to the Artplay Design Center and adjacent properties might become Moscow's SoHo. **Vladimir Filonov**

As innovative as Skolkovo might be, it may not be unique for much longer. Professional artistic visionaries are summoning all their creative energies to design their own innovation hubs, which could become a reality in just a few years.

Moscow has experience with creating artistic districts, such as the zone around the design factory Flacon, near metro station Dmitrovskaya and the former Red October candy factory on Bolotny Ostrov, but the new projects under consideration are unrivaled in their scale.

Their creators presented two different visions for art hubs at the Moscow Urban Forum last week. One is a modern neighborhood in a central Moscow location with an emphasis on commercialization of artistic endeavors, while the other is a far-away oasis with an idealistic long-term vision to discover the identity of the Russian nation.

The Union of Creative Territories, an association of artistic and creative businesses on the left bank of the Yauza River, on the city's east side, is the main initiator of a project called ArtKvartal.

The union has created "a new blueprint for life" with its design of a SoHo-like arts district in the neighborhood.

"We think that life in Moscow should be about more than survival. It should be more than just living your life and enduring the difficulties," said Oliver Schulze, a Danish urban designer who is involved inthe project. "We think that life in the future has to be also about enjoyment. We think that ArtKvartal is a fantastic canvas to actually rewrite that urban narrative."

A SoHo for Moscow

Stretching from the river to Kazansky Station, the roughly 370-hectare territory is primarily occupied by industrial enterprises. After its gradual transformation into ArtKvartal, the area is expected to become a hub for creative business and related communities.

ArtKvartal's originators are looking to create a public-private partnership through which municipal authorities would formally recognize the union's coordination of development of the district, help move out existing factories and improve the layout of roads, paths and other infrastructure to make it more functional.

The Union of Creative Territories is asking the city to give it a mandate to be an interface between potential investors in the project and municipal authorities. In this role, the union would help ensure project consistency and reduce bureaucratic hurdles for firms wanting to set up in the area. With the right kind of help, ArtKvartal could become a reality in five to 10 years, said Viktor Artemyev, a member of the union.

The zone was chosen because it already holds major draws for creative professions, including the Artplay Design Center, contemporary arts center Vinzavod and architecture firm ArtHouse. The project aims to stimulate developers to build new offices, apartments, public spaces for artistic events, restaurants and sports venues.

Project leaders also plan to make the space easier to navigate by opening up green areas that are off-limits to the public because they are controlled by factories.

The Union of Creative Territories plans to attract creative professionals to ArtKvartal by offering rent subsidies to relevant businesses and individuals who want to settle there. Schulze said the group is still defining criteria for who would be included in this creative-class category, but he emphasized that they are not going to exclude noncreative professions.

"We're not saying that we're drawing a red line around the district and mandating that you need a creative passport to come in here," he said.

The union is working with City Hall's culture department on creating the technical framework for ArtKvartal's master plan. Deputy Mayor Andrei Sharonov supports the project and has tried to get Mayor Sergei Sobyanin interested as well by taking him to the project exhibit stand at the Moscow Urban Forum, Artemyev said.

The cost to make ArtKvartal a reality is expected to be about $3 billion.

"We're in the starting phase of it, but make no mistake, we're not here to create dreams that aren't feasible," Schulze said.

But critics have doubts about the lofty plan.

Prowling the Moscow Urban Forum with the confidence of a longtime industry insider, urban designer Aliv criticized ArtKvartal as a commercial project that caters to rich Muscovites. He said artists wouldn't be able to settle in the area because of the inevitably high rent prices in this central location.

He added that the area would suffer from poor ecology. ArtKvartal initiators plan to create bike lanes and make the streets easier for pedestrians to negotiate, but Aliv said these efforts will not improve the situation since the arts district will be in the heart of one of the world's largest megalopolises.

A Skolkovo for artists

Aliv was at the forum to promote his own vision for an arts zone, an innovative oasis for humanities professionals, artists and athletes that was partially inspired by the Skolkovo model. Unlike ArtKvartal, Aliv's vision has a deeper ideological objective.

"The identification with what is 'Russian' will take place in this city and in this way, gradually. In the process of a long creative struggle, the Russian national idea will be born," said Aliv, who declined to reveal his full name.

Aliv and his partners propose to create a new city for about 100,000 people in the European part of Russia. The city, tentatively called Neomoskva, would be about 40 square kilometers, with 24 square kilometers to be constructed at the start and the remaining portions left in reserve for later construction.

The Tula region is one of the locations the Neomoskva coordinators are considering for the project. Creative professionals would be attracted to the city's community atmosphere, quality of life and low real estate prices, which Aliv said would be about seven times lower than in Moscow.

Neomoskva would have recycling containers, eco-friendly transportation options, streets covered by glass ceilings and resident athletes to promote a healthy lifestyle.

Aliv sent the Neomoskva proposal to the Agency for Strategic Initiatives at the end of November. Construction of the city would require about 300 billion rubles ($9 billion) in investments, and the federal government could act as co-investor in the project, Aliv said.

According to Aliv's designs, the government would provide the land and build the transportation and communications infrastructure. Future Neomoskva residents would then make their investment when they buy real estate and sections of the adjoining roads.

The city could be built in five years, with the return on investment expected seven years after the initial phase is complete, Aliv said. But so far, project leaders have had a hard time

persuading potential investors to join the initiative because they position Neomoskva as a social project and don't intend to have an anchor investor.

"Our main difficulty is that we are misunderstood by the modern world, which lives according to materialistic values," Aliv said. "Many people in our country don't understand what it means to work for an idea. They don't have any ideas in their head except one: how to turn a profit from what they're doing."

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