

Q&A: Developer Anton Viner Balancing Quality and Affordability

By [Anatoly Medetsky](#)

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Viner says Dubai is setting an example of investment in good architecture.

Anton Viner has a taste for things that one doesn't encounter too often in Russia: reasonably priced modern architecture and Borjomi, the famous mineral water from Georgia that is under an import ban.

The son of Irina Viner, head coach of the national artistic gymnastics team, he drew inspiration from his mother by building homes, gyms and arts schools as part of a real estate development project in the Moscow region, according to his company's website.

Anton Viner

Education

A year at Schiller International University in London in an MBA program in the early

1990s.

Graduated from the Finance Academy in Moscow.

Work experience

1998 — Co-founded the Sun and City chain of tanning parlors.

2000s — Co-founded restaurants, such as the Uryuk (Dried Apricot) chain and Tel-Aviv.

2012 — Founded Khimki Group, a development company.

Favorite book: "Steve Jobs" by Walter Isaacson.

Reading now: "Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies" by Jim Collins and Jerry I. Porras.

Movie pick: "Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears" (1979), directed by Vladimir Menshov.

Favorite Moscow restaurant: Uryuk chain of Uzbek restaurants.

Weekend getaway destination: Novogorsk, for nice forest walks.

“It will have martial arts such as karate, sambo and judo,” he said about the project, near Khimki, in an interview. “In addition, it will have an Irina Viner Sports Academy, with the best coaches for artistic gymnastics.”

Viner, who is also a stepson of Alisher Usmanov, one of the country’s richest businessmen, declined to speak about his family on the record.

What Viner did reveal is that one of his first jobs was installer at a bathroom services company in Germany, where he lived in the early 1990s.

Now the owner of development company Khimki Group, Viner admires the appearance of Dubai, a place that oil money turned into a “unique city and one of the world’s most beautiful.”

Likewise, at least some of the Russian oil windfall should finance fine architecture in the homeland of the Kremlin and St. Basil’s Cathedral, he said. But it doesn’t mean the cost of a well-designed building has to go through the roof.

“The most difficult thing is to teach the architect and the construction company to create

interesting projects on a budget that will keep the final price of the housing reasonable,” Viner said.

He said keeping fit, which includes weight lifting, helps him deal with the ups and downs of his business. In another sign of his healthy lifestyle, he took several gulps of Borjomi during the interview.

This despite the fact that Federal Consumer Protection Service chief Gennady Onishchenko raised doubts about the quality of the Georgian mineral water when it was effectively banned in 2006, which happened to coincide with a low point in relations between Russia and Georgia.

This interview has been edited for length and quality.

Q: How did you start doing business?

A: I left Russia for Germany in the 1990s after the collapse of the Soviet Union. I lived there for several years, working at various jobs, including that of an installer at a company that did bathroom fixture installations. I also mowed lawns.

Afterward, I went to England to study business administration at Schiller International University but dropped out in the second year to return to Russia. It was a time when business processes were taking shape and developing vigorously in Russia. I thought it would be much more productive to live in Russia at a time like that. Back in Russia, I worked at various companies and banks at first. At the banks, I invested in noncore assets. Later, I made a decision to open a business of my own.

At this point, I can positively say that many ideas, which we managed to implement, became trends in the future. My business partners and I realized that this country lacks sunlight. We recruited trendy designers and set up the Sun and City chain of tanning parlors. We turned tanning into an art and made it popular and trendy. There was a period in this country’s history when the entire country was getting tan. Sun and City outlets were breaking attendance records. Every day, 300 to 400 people would come to a single parlor. We no longer own the chain.

There was also a huge number of restaurant and entertainment projects that I did. Creating the Uryuk (Dried Apricot) restaurant chain is one of the most significant. I am from Uzbekistan and like Uzbek cuisine very much. There was a lack of Uzbek restaurants in Moscow at the time, and my business partners and I decided to start the Uryuk chain. We began to build very beautiful restaurants, each with a distinct design but all having very delicious food. As a result, if you look at the restaurant market today, you will see that we started a trend. There are more Uzbek restaurants in Moscow these days than any others: Russian, Italian or Ukrainian. About 300,000 customers visit Uryuk restaurants every month.

I am trying to do the same in real estate development, to set a socially oriented trend. I am trying to show and prove that one needs to build not only residential space but also sports and educational facilities in the neighborhood because life is not just about the amount of profit.

Q: What is your favorite Uzbek dish?

A: Everything tastes good. Can one say that pilaf is better than lagman, a soup? No. I can say that here, Uzbek food is as popular as Chinese food is in America.

Q: What is the difference between Russian and foreign entrepreneurs?

A: I recently had talks with a German company. As a Russian developer, I found a lot in common with the German developer: a businesslike approach and ideas to resolve difficult situations. They have their problems; we have our own. Pragmatism, resourcefulness and being wise with your money are the qualities that unite Russian and Western businesspeople.

Q: What is the biggest problem for you in the construction business?

A: I've built about 200 facilities. Among them were stores, malls, restaurants and hotels. It's not always more difficult to build a residential building than it is to build and open a popular restaurant. The most difficult thing is to teach the architect and the construction company to create interesting projects on a budget that will keep the final price of the housing reasonable. Unfortunately, most of our architects and contractors are not ready to implement exquisite architectural concepts unless they cost very big money and require expensive materials. However, this kind of project can be built only where they can sell at a high price: in downtown Moscow. Our idea is to build residential compounds in the Moscow region that are like the New Ostozhenka development project in the city but with a developed infrastructure and at a reasonable price. Believe me, this is not easy to do.

Other development projects my partners and I did include the restaurant Ceretto on Tsvetnoi Bulvar, the restaurant Bouillabaisse on Leninsky Prospekt, Bed Cafe on Ulitsa Presnensky Val and a restaurant combined with a concert hall, Chalet Beryozka on Rublyovo-Uspenskoye Shosse.

Q: Who or what inspires you?

A: I am inspired by the opportunities in this country. We are a country that sells a lot of natural resources: oil, gas and metals. We earn a lot. In the United Arab Emirates, the money earned this way is transformed into ritzy architectural structures. Dubai has become a unique city and one of the world's most beautiful. Local investors there put money in architects and designers. A square meter doesn't cost more than in downtown Moscow.

We have an opportunity to change the thinking of our people. First of all, investors and bankers so they follow the example of the old Russian nobility and entrepreneurs, who invested in beautiful architecture and invited Italian architects to work here.

Secondly, I am, of course, inspired by Steve Jobs and his revolutionary iPhone. His destiny gives me food for thought when I pursue my own projects.

Q: What has shaped you as a person?

A: I saw how integrity in dealing with people leads to success and vice versa. I heard many stories that showed that an unfair and unscrupulous approach is the road to nowhere.

Q: Is there anything you can't do now but would like to learn?

A: I would very much like to learn to give myself a break. Most of my friends are professionals at vacationing. They move from country to country, visit interesting places, pick or map out unusual tours. If I get in a situation where nobody bothers me, in five to seven days I begin to feel the urge to go back to work, to the processes that I left. I think it's right to have a break. Workaholism deserves to be punished just like doing nothing.

Q: What has lately made you feel surprised, delighted or disappointed?

A: I have felt disappointed about people who have great potential, who are very successful, but all the while they don't want to do anything for the people who live in their country.

Q: Where are you off to after the interview?

A: I lift weights a lot. Weight lifting defines my train of thought. Lifting heavy weights is a constant counteraction. When a huge barbell presses you down and you need to push it up, it looks like the efforts that you make in life.

Overcoming the force of gravity is the same as resolving a difficult situation and achieving success. Weight lifting is very much like my attitude to life. My working weight for the bench press is about 100 kilograms.

Q: Why do you build sports facilities?

A: It's no secret that it's extremely difficult to send your children to a good school and at the same time take care of their health and artistic development by finding, next to your home, suitable sports classes or arts lessons. Getting to good teachers and coaches at sports or drama schools sometimes takes you hours of being stuck in traffic.

That's why we decided to have them all in one place in Novogorsk by creating a sports and education cluster that would be situated next to the residential property we are building.

It will have martial arts such as karate, sambo and judo. In addition, it will have the Irina Viner Sports Academy, with the best coaches for artistic gymnastics. In addition to that, we are building a swimming pool together with Olympics champion Alexander Popov.

And there will be space for chess, boxing and a painting school. The facilities will be open to all people in the neighborhood, not just the ones who live in our residential development.

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