The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Young Architects Visualize an 'Awesome' Moscow

By Lena Smirnova

December 09, 2013



A computer rendition of a proposal to transform the city's currently grey Novy Arbat into a multi-level green zone. **Daria Onokhova**

Muscovites were asked to imagine what would make Moscow an "awesome" place to live and had their dreams visualized in 84 sketches by professional architects as part of the "What Moscow Wants" exhibit, which was on display at the Moscow Urban Forum last week.

As much as getting people's voices heard, this project was about giving young professionals the opportunity to showcase their talent — a rarity in a city where the architectural market is dominated by a few strong firms.

Moscow residents had to complete three simple statements: "It would be awesome if ... ," "this way people will be able to ... ," and "this way the city can become ... ." All three of these were used to set an optimistic tone and prevent people from using the platform to complain about their neighbors or other mundane problems, said the project's director Olga Polishyuk.

"This is a story about ideas. Not about problems or about complaints," she said.

More than 2,000 people left their ideas on the website Moscowidea.ru from July 10 to Sept. 22, and architects voluntarily responded to specific pitches with 84 sketches.

Proposals ranged from ambitious plans to build new bridges and theme markets, to simple adjustments like creating a roof shield for the people waiting in lines outside the Pushkin Museum, to the offbeat idea of three-story heated homes for stray cats.

The project provided a rare platform for the country's young architects to display their work, Polishyuk said. These architects often shy away from competitions either because they do not think they can win against the few prominent firms that dominate the industry or because they are afraid of losing ownership of their ideas.

The city's chief architect Sergei Kuznetsov told The Moscow Times on Friday that he has not seen the "What Moscow Wants" exhibit yet, but noted its value for the capital.

"I think it is an interesting initiative to collect such information," Kuznetsov said. "We are talking a lot about creating collaborative relationships between the people and the government. Such projects help to establish these connections."

Mayor Sergei Sobyanin visited the exhibit on Friday and picked out a few favorite projects. Beyond that, Polishyuk said she hopes the government will take action to make some of the designs a reality. The project organizers already have plans to showcase some of the best work to appropriate city departments.

However, past experience suggests a lack of enthusiasm in the government about the ideas of young urban designers.

Roger Bayley, program director at the Vancouver-based firm Smartforme, which works on energy-efficient buildings, came to Moscow in 2009 to consult with a group of young architects who were interested in his experience creating Vancouver's Olympic Village. The students developed ideas to transform Sochi in time for the 2014 Winter Games, but officials ultimately blocked their participation in the planning conversation.

"The wall was too high," Bayley said.

Yulia Kuznetsova is in a team of 10 young architects who are working on a university project to revamp the Krasnaya Presnya district, near the Moscow City business district.

There are platforms where industry newcomers can present their projects, but they have to fight to get their ideas heard, Kuznetsova said, adding that even then, it is unlikely they will get any concrete support from the state or business communities.

"It would be great if it were possible to present some meaningful student work and gain someone's attention," she said.

That Russia's emerging talent is often kept in the shadows did not go unnoticed by foreign experts who arrived at the Urban Forum. Ellen Dunham-Jones, architecture and urban design professor at the Georgia Institute of Technology in the U.S., said she was excited to see lots

of young people in the audience, but regretted that she had not seen them presenting onstage.

"Pay attention!" she advised. "Listen to the voices of the future because they are the future. If they are telling you what they want, give it to them."

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Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2013/12/09/young-architects-visualize-an-awesome-moscow-a30341