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E-Vote on Demolition of Moscow Monument a Development Ploy?

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The 'Russian eiffel tower' inspired greats like Gaudi and Le Corbusier.

If cell phone-wielding Muscovites so will it, a landmark of Soviet modernist architecture faces destruction, possibly to clear a path for real estate developers.

The iconic Shukhov Tower, brainchild of architect Vladimir Shukhov, was built in 1922 for the purpose of radio broadcasting, but has fallen into disrepair after more than a decade of disuse.

Its tentative removal has had preservationists and architects raging since it was first proposed last year.

An electronic poll was launched this week via the city-run Active Citizen project to assist in determining the structure's fate.

Votes cast using the iPhone and Android application will be "taken into consideration" by the City Hall, according to the description of the vote, which runs through July 6.

Options available to voters include refurbishing of the 160-meter "Russian Eiffel Tower," or dismantling the slowly crumbling hyperboloid structure for repairs, with the possibility of an eventual relocation.

The vote has done little to appease critics of the tower's demolition.

"You just do not poll people on heritage," Vladimir Shukhov Jr., great-grandson of the tower's creator, said Tuesday.

The fairness and representativeness of the vote also raise a lot of questions, said Konstantin Mikhailov of conservationist group Arkhnadzor.

The most popular vote carried out by Active Citizen in the past only attracted 335,000 voters from among Moscow's population of 14 million, according to data made available by City Hall, which has so far complied with the outcomes of polls conducted via the app.

The press service of the City Hall's cultural heritage department had not returned a request for comment by the time of this article's publication.

'Public Hazard'

The government earmarked 135 million rubles ($4 million) for repairs in 2010, but never actually provided the funds, the tower's owner, state-run Russian Television and Radio Broadcasting Network, said in March.

The Communication and Mass Media Ministry first pitched the idea of dismantling the tower in December.

Deputy head of the ministry Alexei Volin claimed in February that the tower had begun to pose a public hazard because scraps of rusted metal were being blown loose by the wind, raining down within a 50-meter area surrounding it.

Preservationists concede the tower needs repairs, but said it could — and should — be done without moving the structure.

A historical landmark can be moved if it is vital for its preservation, according to Russian legislation.

But the scenario envisaged by Russian law is opposite that of the Shukhov Tower, which would be destroyed by any attempts to dismantle it, said Mikhailov, citing two independent studies quoted by the Public Chamber in March.

A proper round of maintenance can give the Shukhov Tower three more decades until it would need further repairs, Shukhov Jr. said.

Lobbying is in the Air

The renewed attempt to relocate the tower can be attributed to lobbyists, experts agreed.

"This is just some people trying to seize the land under the tower," said Grigory Revzin,

a leading architectural critic.

Moscow laws cap building height in the city's center at 40 meters, but the limit can be waived if a new building is constructed to replace an older one that has been demolished.

This means the Shukhov Tower — built on state-owned land that can be privatized — could be replaced with a 160-meter office tower.

Given the prices of commercial real estate in central Moscow of about $11,000 per square meter and the typical floor space of buildings of comparable size, this could translate into project worth at least $440 million.

No real estate developer has publicly admitted holding an interest in the territory surrounding the Shukhov Tower.

Two separate Moscow Times sources in the architectural community named Summa Group of Ziyavudin Magomedov, linked by media reports to Deputy Prime Minister Arkady Dvorkovich, as a potential developer.

A company spokesman denied Summa was interested in any projects in the tower's vicinity, adding that the holding's construction arm focused on engineering projects, not real estate development.

UNESCO Candidate

Vladimir Shukhov (1853-1939) was a groundbreaking engineer and researcher credited, among other things, with laying the foundations of Russia's now-thriving oil industry.

He was also an innovative architect whose work has influenced such greats as Gaudi, Le Corbusier and Oscar Niemeyer.

The tower on Moscow's Shabolovka Ulitsa, a prime example of the steel gridlock structure pioneered by Shukhov, was originally billed at 350 meters, but had to be shortened because of civil war-related shortages.

The building was praised by renowned architect Norman Foster and proposed for the UNESCO World Heritage list in 2006 by the UNESCO-affiliated International Council on Monuments and Sites.

The call was backed in March by 38 architects, including industry powerhouses Rem Koolhaas, Tadao Ando and Elizabeth Diller, who also asked President Vladimir Putin in a public appeal to protect the tower. Putin and UNESCO both kept mum on the issue.

The tower could be the linchpin of a museum complex capable of turning the drowsy Shabolovka district into a major tourist attraction, said Shukhov Jr., whose Shukhov Tower Foundation has for years been lobbying the museum effort.

But architecture expert Revzin was skeptical.

"The removal lobby would not be able to push the project through, but they are perfectly

capable of stalling any preservation effort for years," he said.

See also:

1920s Soviet Radio Tower to Be Dismantled

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