The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Apartment Builders Find Alternatives to Concrete Panels

By Alexander Panin

June 30, 2014



Many apartment blocks in Moscow are built quickly using prefabricated concrete panels that are simply set in place.

City Hall cannot yet fully ban the outdated models of prefabricated concrete-block panels used for the construction of cheap apartments, but a move away from 19th-century standards that shaped the face of Moscow is already at the door.

The winners of the annual Real Estate Records competition, which rates the best development projects, were revealed last week in Moscow. Among them was Terra Auri, a company that is providing evidence that affordable and good-looking housing can be built quickly with an apartment complex it is set to finish in northern Moscow this year.

Denis Borodako, head of Terra Auri, said his company came up with new technology to make attractive facades that will cover the conventional concrete-panels. Also the first floors have a different design concept that includes high ceilings, he added.

Another novelty is that individual apartments within the building can have unique designs, he said, something a standard panel apartment can't offer.

While providing all the features of a high class apartment, the developer also improved landscape design inside and around its residential complex despite the city's limited budget for construction of standard apartment blocks.

Until now, Moscow has only been concerned with the quantity of square meters built each year rather than the quality of affordable housing, though the authorities have indicated the situation is about to change.

In April, Moscow and Moscow region authorities appeared ready to ban more than 30 types of prefabricated panels that have been used in apartment construction since that 1990s after labeling them outdated. The ban, however, was softened to a "recommendation" once it became clear that panel producers could not switch to updated technology overnight.

"These panels are made at large factories that employ a lot of workers. Because they are used in many development projects in the Moscow region, a strict ban on them would have had negative consequences, resulting in frozen production and construction," said Maria Litinetskaya, head of the Metrium Group real estate company.

But several panel types are likely to be banned in future, she said, while others will be modernized, a process that requires both time and sound investment.

More and more developers are now ready to do just that. Terra Auri is currently designing a new series of panels for two major customers that have plans to build factories to produce them, Borodako said. One of these customers is Glavmosstroi, a subsidiary of Oleg Deripaska's Basic Element and one of the largest construction companies in the country.

"The volumes we are talking about range from half a million to 1 million square meters per year," Borodako said. This equates to about one-eighth of all apartment space built in Moscow each year.

New apartments will be built using quality insulation, soundproofing and individual design options.

"We will employ a 'domino system' that will allow 150 different types of flats to be designed within one building — ranging from an economy studio to a business-class apartment of up to 100 square meters. And it will be a lot cheaper than they usually cost," Borodako said.

Until recently, the move away from old concrete panel apartments was held back, partly due to City Hall's lack of interest. Also, with the real estate market growing rapidly there was no demand for variety, developers said.

"Everything construction companies managed to build was sold off instantly and their production facilities were loaded to full capacity," Borodako said.

Today, not only do these old panel types not suit Moscow architecture, they do not suit the consumer, he added.

See also:

Moscow Renews Demolition Crusade Against Khrushchev's 1950s Apartment Blocks

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Original url:
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