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Q&A: Meet Natalia Fishman

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Natalia Fishman / Daniil Shvedov

At 27, Natalia Fishman is one of the best-known names in Kazan. She was raised in Samara, but moved to Moscow to study at MGIMO. Fishman had a spectacular career in the capital, she became adviser to Sergei Kapkov, head of the culture department at Moscow City Hall, at just 19. She moved to Kazan three years ago at the invitation of the president of Tatarstan.

Why would a successful Muscovite move to Kazan?

Rustam Minnikhanov [the president of Tatarstan] was on a visit to Moscow and I showed him around the renovated Gorky Park and the Moscow River embankment, then I took him to the Jewish Museum. Sometime later he called me with a job offer.

Minnikhanov is a great boss and Tatarstan has the highest standard of living in Russia after Moscow and St. Petersburg. I'm talking about things like food, clothing, medical services, beauty salons — all of the above is available here and some of it is of better quality. The traffic situation is way better than in Moscow, too. The only area in which Kazan is lacking is culture.

What does the Tatarstan Urban Development Institute do?

Over the last three years, we have overseen the construction and restoration of 267 sites all around Tatarstan: parks, embankments, boulevards and squares. Last year we organized the first-ever Russian Youth Architectural Biennale.

I believe that one of the key problems in our society is that we don't know how to listen to each other, how to negotiate, how to recognize that other groups might have different interests. For instance, imagine a residential building that has a courtyard: one of the neighbors wants to turn it into a parking lot, another one wants a children's playground and the third one wants none of the above. When we plan a new urban space we start by talking to the residents and we clear all the architectural designs with them. And I think these negotiations that we organize are the most important things we do.

Which sites have you found most interesting to work on?

We are getting the new embankment on Lake Kaban ready in time for the World Cup. We are doing it in partnership with a Chinese company and there will be waterfalls that will also act as purifiers; it's a very environmentally friendly project. Another project I'm proud of is Black Lake Park in the very center of Kazan we restored it with Wowhaus, a Moscow architectural firm. It's actually the oldest park in the city.

What are your favorite places in kazan?

I would recommend that visitors go to the Kremlin at noon, because that's when you can hear azan (the call to prayer from the minaret of Kul Sharif) at the same time as the tolling of the bells at Spasskaya Tower. For me, this is the essence of Tatarstan. I was absolutely stunned when I heard it for the first time. It's really one of the very few places where something like this is possible, where people of different faiths live so comfortably alongside each other.

I also like to visit the Hazine Gallery, which is part of the Tatarstan Fine Arts Museum, and look at the paintings by Kazan impressionist Nicolai Fechin.

Another favorite spot is Kazan's Gorky Park. I like to take a coffee to go from Uragan-Sarai and just walk around or sit on a bench.

If people are tired of the city rush, I'd suggest the Gorkinsko-Ometyevsky forest — it's a unique place, with 90 hectares of land that were supposed to be razed to the ground in order to clear space for a six-lane highway and several high rises. But local activists protested this new development and won, and a park was built instead of a highway.

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