

A Building Boom Brings Glitz to a Dowdy City

New skyscrapers tower over the old landmark Stalinist buildings and onion-domed churches

By Alastair Gee

Five miles south of the Kremlin and Moscow's touristy center, there's a trash-strewn peninsula in the city's river. Stray dogs live by a scraggy patch of woodland, and salespeople while away the days in a remote market. It won't be there much longer.

City authorities have approved the construction here of what they promise will be the world's biggest building in terms of floor space at a rumored cost of \$4 billion. The 1,476-foot-tall Crystal Island, which resembles a giant witch's hat, will have 27 million square feet of floor space—more than four times the size of the Pentagon—and contain 3,000 hotel rooms, 900 apartments, and an adjustable skin to withstand extreme temperatures.

Bankrolled by oil and gas revenues, Moscow is building ever bigger and higher.

A revolving tower will join a changing skyline that includes the just completed tallest building in Europe, the 889-foot-tall, 61-story Naberezhnaya Tower. Work has started on a ring of 100 skyscrapers around the city center. And the capital's head planner has proposed a second downtown and nine new highways, some with 18 lanes, and wants to spend \$200 billion to \$300 billion over the next 20 years on redevelopment. "Moscow is *the* place at the moment," says British architect Norman Foster, whose firm designed Crystal Island.

The city's transformation

is partly spurred by mundane concerns like real estate shortages and traffic gridlock. Moscow's roads were meant to handle 2 million cars; there are now 4 million. But by some accounts, it is also rooted in a desire to shake off Russia's post-Soviet loss of prestige. "In society, there's a feeling of long-held humiliation," says Mikhail Moskvina-Tarkhanov, head of Moscow's planning committee.



The envisioned Crystal Island development, billed as the world's biggest building

tee. "It comes from the disintegration of the 1990s, when we all went around as if we had been robbed and we lived on humanitarian aid."

Demolition. As developers vie for space and land prices soar, however, Moscow's historical architecture has become vulnerable. Some 200 historic buildings have been torn down in the past five years for new projects, say preservationists. "I can't travel around town without nitroglycerin," says Aleksei Klimenko, a member of a city architecture board. "I see these disgraces, and I have heart attacks."

Moscow recently celebrat-

ed its 860th birthday, though its historic buildings date mostly to the 18th and 19th centuries, when the imperial capital was St. Petersburg and Moscow was a second city of pastel-colored mansions and churches. The Bolsheviks, moving back to Moscow after the Revolution, championed the utopian style of Constructivism and in the 1920s built communal housing and workers' clubs with clean, bold pro-

Square, was demolished and is being rebuilt with better parking. And the art nouveau Voentorg military store, despite protected status, was demolished in 2003 to make way for an office and retail complex. "Our understanding of the value of the original has decreased," says Klimenko. "Fakes dominate."

The new towers, meanwhile, could ruin the city's skyline, activists warn. City authorities counter that

Moscow is no worse than other European capitals. Moskvina-Tarkhanov points to the extensive remodeling of Berlin and the building of a gherkin-shaped skyscraper in central London. And while some buildings, like the Children's World toy store from the 1950s, are in imminent danger, a few have been saved. City officials "destroyed entirely monstrously at first, like the Bolsheviks," says David Sarkisyan, head of Moscow's architecture museum and

usually a critic of city authorities. "They put up awful buildings; they destroyed everything. But they've become wiser."

As old Moscow struggles to survive, there's no stopping the new. Crystal Island was approved despite staunch criticism—Klimenko, for one, dismissively labels it a "Buddhist temple, stupa, or pagoda." On the peninsula, market workers hadn't heard of plans for the oddly shaped megastructure. Sniffs Lyubov Ivanova, a pensioner tending a stall of baby clothes, "I suppose we'll have to pick up and move elsewhere." ●