

Mariinsky Theater Complex to Cost \$629M

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A computer-generated image showing what the complex will look like when completed, according to the Canadian architects who took over the project in 2009.

Moscow took center stage for the arts when the Bolshoi Theater opened on Oct. 28, but St. Petersburg, the historical cultural capital, will quickly answer Moscow's challenge with an entire cultural complex set to open in fall 2012.

The complex will consist of the historic Mariinsky Theater founded in 1860, a new concert hall opened in 2007 and the Mariinsky second stage, which construction company Metrostroi promised to finish by fall 2012.

"These pieces ... when put together will add up to more than the sum of their parts into a cultural complex that is unrivaled," said Jack Diamond, designer of the new Mariinsky Theater.

Diamond told The Moscow Times in an interview that he is proposing that all three structures rest on the same plane, connected by cobblestone, granite setts or some other paving material. Streets will remain flush with all the pedestrian paths and small light pillars will demarcate lanes for traffic.

He also hopes a tree line will unite these buildings. The narrow park just north of where the conservatory is situated will extend past the existing Mariinsky Theater and terminate at the door of the new building. A new footbridge will also act to connect the two theaters split only by Kryukov Canal.

Diamond proposed two glass columns of light seated at the entrance and exit to act as gateways marking the cultural precinct. They would then be connected by a necklace of pedestrian-level lights to multiply the architectural effect unifying the area. Neither the gateway nor the ring of lights has yet to be officially confirmed or budgeted, but Diamond believes that the concept is gaining favor.

According to Toronto-based Diamond and Schmitt Architects, the Mariinsky's new stage will add 1,800 seats, span 70,000 square meters, reach up to eight stories high and cost 325 million euros (\$446 million). It also offers a roof theater for events during the White Nights for a panoramic view of the monuments in a city where houses are limited to a six-story height.

"I have watched people climb all the way up to the top of St. Isaac's Cathedral, a massive effort to get above and look across at the city. Well, we're going to make it easy and celebrate that," Diamond said.

The project, however, has been anything but easy, wrought with setbacks, inflated costs and controversy.

In September, the state agency Northwest Directorate for Construction, Reconstruction and Restoration switched construction companies overseeing the aboveground work. Metrostroi won the tender, promising a 30 percent discount and to finish the project by fall 2012. But ballet critic and expert Igor Stupnikov did not believe this, saying "it is a far-fetched idea."

Designs were swapped in 2007 when the Northwest Directorate annulled its contract with Dominique Perrault, allegedly because the roof was not designed for St. Petersburg's arctic climate. Stupnikov told The Moscow Times that four years after approving the designs, a building committee from Moscow declared that the building also violated height restrictions. The Urban Toronto web site reported that by that time \$20 million had already been spent on construction. The state agency was not available Monday to provide a comment.

Diamond and Schmitt were then chosen to rework the plans, and in 2009 they began construction incorporating the features already in place. The completion date has since been projected as late as 2015, and general director of the Mariinsky Theater Valery Gergiev gave a news conference in August to dispel the rumors.

The cost of the project has also sharply increased, rising from an estimated \$100 million in 2003 to May 2011 when the government confirmed a total cost of 19.17 billion rubles (\$629

million) — to be paid for by the Federal Treasury.

Despite all of the drama, Diamond flatly told The Moscow Times that he would never have given up the opportunity to design the Mariinsky.

When asked how the residents of St. Petersburg were receiving the new facility, Stupnikov said, "For them, it is just another building."

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