

Rem Koolhaas and Dasha Zhukova Build a Moscow Museum

Art collector and philanthropist Dasha Zhukova is launching an ambitious campaign to connect Moscow to the international art world, and she's tapped architect Rem Koolhaas to execute her vision

BY TONY PERROTTET



ON THE COVER | Dasha Zhukova and Rem Koolhaas photographed by David Bailey. Zhukova wears Saint Laurent by Hedi Slimane wool gabardine jacket, \$3,790, pants, \$990, and silk georgette shirt, \$1,290, all 212-980-2970 PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID BAILEY FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

IT'S A RADIANT DAY in Moscow, and two of the city's most creative collaborators, Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas and Russian-born art impresario Dasha Zhukova, have donned white construction helmets as they stride excitedly through Gorky Park, the 300-acre riverside expanse that was, until recently, a symbol of Russia's urban blight. Created in the 1920s as a Soviet recreational paradise, the once-verdant park fell into decay after the collapse of the U.S.S.R. in 1991, its barren fields scattered with broken carnival rides and roamed by drug dealers. The \$2 billion renovation, which began in 2011, has transformed Gorky Park overnight into an Oz-like retreat, amid Moscow's economic tumult, that would not seem out of place in Seattle or Barcelona. We pass manicured lawns adorned with flower gardens;

chic cafes serving gyoza and wood-fired pizza; and yoga and capoeira classes by the Moscow River. There are jogging trails and a state-of-the-art bicycle-sharing program. Wi-Fi is available in every leafy nook.

For the past two years, the most exciting attraction in this cosmopolitan Arcadia has been cultural: the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, Zhukova's ambitious attempt to connect Moscow to the international art world. Garage was named for its original home in a more remote area of the city, an avant-garde bus depot from the 1920s designed by the revered constructivist architect Konstantin Melnikov. Founded in 2008, it introduced Russians to global art stars such as Marina Abramović, John Baldessari and James Turrell—a radical notion in a country that had been cut off from Western artistic influences for decades. “Garage was the first space truly dedicated to contemporary art,” says Sandra Nedvetskaia, the director of the Cosmocoscow art fair, held in Moscow last September. “Those early shows were unprecedented for Russia. Garage paved the way.”

For the moment, Garage is housed in a temporary site in Gorky Park, a stunning prefabricated pavilion designed by Japanese Pritzker prize winner Shigeru Ban, incorporating 20-foot-high columns made from recycled cardboard to create a circular, light-filled temple of art. My meeting with Koolhaas and Zhukova coincides with an exhibition, titled *The New International*, that examines contemporary art in the post-glasnost era. A copper shard of Vietnamese-Danish artist Danh Vō's *We the People*, a reproduction of the Statue of Liberty in life-size pieces, sits near the work of Russian provocateur Alexander Brener, who spray-painted a dollar sign on a Kazimir Malevich painting in Amsterdam in 1997.

Koolhaas and Zhukova are leading the way toward the heart of the futuristic park, where our goal is an unmistakable landmark of the Communist past—a Soviet relic called Vremena Goda. The name means “seasons of the year,” and it opened in 1968 as a model restaurant for the working masses. Trapped in Gorky Park's spiral of decay, it shuttered in the early 1990s and is now a graffiti-covered ruin. From a distance, it looks like a two-story concrete bunker, but this structure will be reborn in June as the new Garage.

Trailed by an entourage of young Russian art experts on the Garage team, we gingerly step over debris to enter the time-battered shell of the Brezhnev-era building. I'm immediately struck by its soaring ceilings and wraparound windows, which allow sunshine to stream in. The centerpiece is a crumbling mosaic, a kitsch-heroic Soviet image of autumn personified as a wild-haired woman, the last of the seasonal images to survive. Instead of erasing the building's scars, Koolhaas has kept them as a central part of his design.

“The building is basically a found object,” he says, pointing with approval at the battered pillars and gaping holes. “We are embracing it as it is.”

“Rem likes to challenge the white-cube tradition of Western museums,” Zhukova adds. “The raw brick and broken tiles will be a more stimulating backdrop for art.”



THIS WAY UP | A staircase inside the Brezhnev-era building in Moscow's Gorky Park that will be reborn in June as the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art *MUSEUM PHOTOGRAPHY BY NICHOLAS ALAN COPE FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE*

As we wander the ruin, my two guides could hardly seem more different: Koolhaas, the 70-year-old Dutch design legend, towering and slim, lopes along in an austere gray coat, exuding the brooding, gnomonic air of a Dostoevsky character; Zhukova, a 33-year-old Russian-born, California-raised philanthropist, has a dazzling white smile that brings to mind a young Audrey Hepburn. She's casually glamorous in a vermilion cashmere top, sleek pants and sneakers, having kicked off her high heels with a relieved laugh after a press conference. But the unlikely pair share a vision.

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forge ever-closer links to the global art scene. And, as the design for Vremena Goda shows, it's doing so in a way that embraces Russia's turbulent past. "Soviet architecture has one quality that is not generally recognized: its generous proportions," says Koolhaas, dismissing the recent fashion for reviling and demolishing any relic of the Communist era. "We maintain that original aesthetic."

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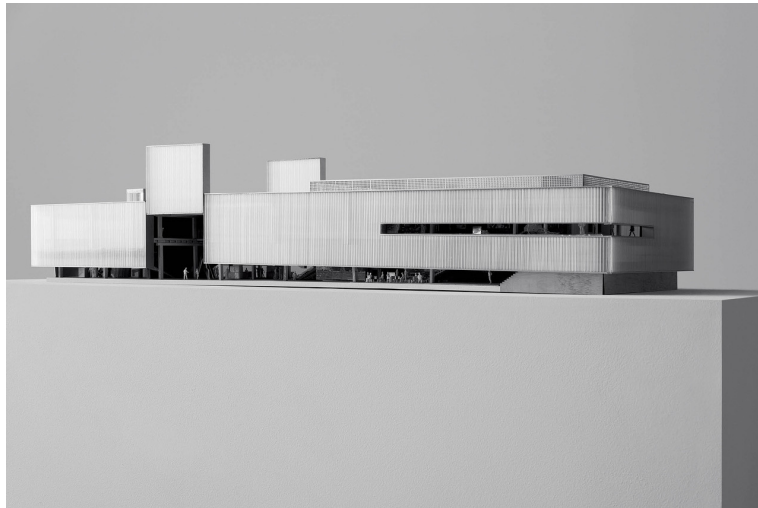
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The intact structure will be encased in a double layer of polycarbonate plastic, a translucent box that hovers six feet above ground. This exoskeleton will allow light to filter in during the day and project outwardly after dark. "The existing structure will be wrapped in a new layer, giving it a modern depth," Koolhaas explains. Even the mosaic is being maintained in its damaged state by a conservator from Florence. In addition, one enormous wall of the new structure will slide open to reveal an atrium for large commissioned artworks. There will be a roof terrace, cafe, screening room, bookstore and outdoor sculpture—all the trappings familiar to museum-goers from Sydney to Shanghai, but lavish indulgences in Russia, where unimaginative, poorly lit institutions, with glowering babushkas guarding every room, remain the norm.

The Rotterdam-based Koolhaas had visited the U.S.S.R. many times in the late 1960s, inspired by its literature, art and architecture, especially that of the constructivist Ivan Leonidov, about whom he was writing a book. Indeed, he tells me, "Without Russia, I would never have become an architect." This

youthful romance was revived in 2009, when he helped found the Strelka Institute for Media, Architecture and Design “to change the cultural and physical landscapes of Russian cities.” Located on an island a few hundred yards up the Moscow River, Strelka was contracted to oversee the initial stages of the regeneration of Gorky Park, an effort largely financed by Zhukova’s husband—the London-based Russian billionaire Roman Abramovich (the couple met in 2005 and were married a few years later; they have two children). Together, Zhukova and Abramovich have assembled an impressive art collection that includes works by Lucian Freud and Francis Bacon.



And so Koolhaas and Zhukova found themselves in 2010 on an inspection tour of the then-dismal park, passing the poetic husk of the abandoned Vremena Goda, once a model for the Communist good life. At the time, Zhukova was looking for a new home for Garage, and Gorky Park was an obvious locale. “We knew our presence would make a real difference here,” she says. Koolhaas, meanwhile, found many elements of the building appealing, starting with its modest scale. The floor space will be 58,000 square feet, a fraction of, say, a typical Frank Gehry construction—Gehry’s design for the new Guggenheim Abu Dhabi encompasses 450,000 square feet.

“I have long been worried about the increasing size of art museums,” Koolhaas says. “At one point I calculated that our firm was competing for museums that would cover 34 football fields in area. It was a form of madness—a binge of overexpansion.” He recalls his own childhood in Holland, where compact art museums staged exhibitions that influenced him enormously. “To me there is no direct relationship between the size of a museum and what you can do.” We gazed up at a spray-painted wall. “At the same time, I became interested in architectural preservation as an antidote to the exhibitionism of new museums. Here, we are not restoring the building. We are preserving its decay.”

WITH ITS CREATIVE interplay between Russia's past and a global future, the new Garage is the latest sign of surging energy in Moscow's art scene. "Garage is a hugely important institution," says Marina Loshak, the new director of the Pushkin Museum who is currently overseeing its \$700 million renovation. "It is transforming the way Russian people are exposed to art."

"Garage has raised the bar for Russian museums and galleries," agrees curator Evgeny Antufiev, who also directs Garage's grant system for young artists. "Gallery owners now realize the global language of contemporary art. When we put on a show, we have to ask: How would Garage do this? We have to do as good or better!"

The enthusiasm is matched by foreign artists: California-based John Baldessari met Zhukova in Zurich and leapt at the invitation to have a one-man exhibition at Garage in 2013. "I never thought in a million years that I would show in Russia," he says, laughing. "Most American artists show in Paris, Rome, London. I was the envy of all my artist friends." He found the experience fascinating, as he met local artists and a receptive audience. "Dasha was completely charming," he adds. "She has no attitude and is very dedicated and open."

After our hard-hat tour, I join Zhukova for potent Italian macchiato and Russian sweets known as "chocolate potatoes," as she explains how her own cross-cultural past prepared her to move between Russia and the West. She was born in Moscow, where her molecular biologist mother and oil magnate father divorced when she was 3. In 1989, she moved to Houston and had a bout of culture shock. "I didn't know a word of English," she recalls. "I remember seeing Froot Loops for the first time. I couldn't believe that I got to eat colored circles of sugar for breakfast!" Her interest in contemporary art began when she moved to London, where she studied homeopathic medicine and launched her own boutique fashion label. By 2006 she had started dating Abramovich, and as the two traveled widely to galleries, auctions and biennales, she found her passion for art increasing, despite a lack of formal training. Her debut in London's art scene came two years later when she co-sponsored the Serpentine Gallery's summer party in Hyde Park, one of the city's most anticipated and highest-profile events.

By then, she had been traveling back to Moscow for four years, exploring the spirit of the transformed city. "I tried to find out the pulse of the people," she says. "I found young Russians very knowledgeable about global culture, talking easily about art in Berlin, film in New York. It was a new type of global Russia, using the Internet and with a deep thirst for knowledge. Garage has become an outlet for that youthful energy."

Today, Garage does feel like a laboratory of Russian youth: Everyone working there appears to have just stepped out of college. “The average age of the team is 28,” Zhukova says. “We are very modern. We want to focus on the generation that is shaping Russia’s future.” Even the director, Anton Belov, was only 26 when he was hired in 2010. “Of course, I was working in the field, curating, organizing, editing, doing all the sorts of stuff they wanted inside Garage,” says Belov. “But at my age, becoming director was still a huge step.” The visitors are overwhelmingly fresh-faced too. At a Koolhaas lecture later that night, a line of twentysomething hipsters snaked across Gorky Park. Although a U.N.-style simultaneous translation service was provided, everyone spoke perfect English. “Our core audience is 18-to-35-year-olds,” Zhukova says. “As a friend of mine observed, I’ve almost aged out!”



The Koolhaas-designed structure, still under construction, opens in June. *MUSEUM PHOTOGRAPHY BY NICHOLAS ALAN COPE FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE*

So it almost comes as a surprise to learn that the heart of the museum is a historical archive—the world’s largest repository of Russian art from the 1970s to the chaotic 1990s, when the demise of the U.S.S.R. gave way to economic crisis and a sense of social collapse. “This is our secret room,” jokes archivist Sasha Obukhova, as she pushes open a doorway to reveal cardboard boxes overflowing with videotapes

of performance art pieces. Many were recorded by Obukhova herself more than 20 years ago, when she realized that the era's hidden creativity was in danger of being forgotten.

“Our contemporary art is rooted in the tradition of underground art,” explains Obukhova, a soft-spoken woman in her mid-40s. “In the Soviet era, there were no official exhibits. When freedom came in 1991, the situation didn't improve. There was no financial support for artists, no market, no galleries, no press. And yet, there was so much activity!” Artists would stage pop-up exhibits in their homes, happenings occurred in abandoned warehouses, art essays circulated in single-typed copies. “Because it was all so ephemeral, it urgently needed to be documented.” She began recording events, and eventually collected thousands of photographs, press releases, invitations and posters. With no museum interested in the material, she stored everything in boxes at her parents' apartment, filling an entire room. She was about to abandon the cache when Garage director Belov arrived in 2012 and suggested it be conserved in Gorky Park.

Garage's research department is now housed in a gleaming white building, where a half dozen curators are busily cataloging piles of material. As we nose around, Obukhova pulls out a few *objets* at random: a poetry collection, *The School of Airplane Stewardesses*, from a one-man publishing house called, she translates, “A Bird You Cannot F— Enough”; videos of artists infiltrating peak-hour crowds on the busy Moscow streets, then raising banners so it looked like they were staging a mass protest; frayed, blurry photos of art gallery receptions, the men wild-eyed, with flowing beards, the girls blond and winsome in flowing dresses, looking like Allen Ginsberg groupies. Obukhova's archaeological task is hardly complete. To give context to the archive, she now tracks down and interviews the artists. She often surprises them with her depth of detail. “They tell me that I'm like a psychoanalyst, because I help them remember.”

THE HISTORICAL IMAGES were certainly news to me. I last visited Moscow at the nadir of its recent fortunes, in 1994, when Boris Yeltsin was flailing at the helm of the new Russian Federation and the idea of an art scene was all but impossible for an outsider to imagine, let alone access. Moscow was still enveloped in glum austerity—there were very few restaurants, and those that were open seemed to serve no actual meals. Exploring the city was a challenge. When I asked taxi drivers about a fare, they would demand \$20 cash, no matter how short the distance. When I demurred, they shouted, “F— you!” and sped off.

On my recent trip to visit Garage, I entered a different world. This time, I checked into the Ritz-Carlton, whose gilded lobby was crowded with rich Chinese businessmen; up on the roof deck, overlooking Red Square, revelers on white sofas were gorging on sashimi. At one point, I followed crowds into the 24-hour Café Pushkin, where waiters were dressed like 18th-century footmen and oligarchs' girlfriends, drunk on Beluga vodka, were throwing their high heels at each other across the table.

Moscow's wealth is also spilling into the art world, as the super rich—at least those untouched by the country's crippled oil industry or the ruble's volatility—are gradually deciding that art may be more satisfying to acquire than another mega-yacht. Last September, the Cosmoscw art fair set up shop in the Manege (a cavernous former riding academy built after the Napoleonic Wars) with enormous success. A new wave of private galleries is giving young artists a platform for the first time. "There are so many incredibly talented artists in Russia, but there has been no opportunity for them to be presented in the United States or Europe," explains Madina Gogova, a 28-year-old who with her twin, Mariana, opened Artwin Gallery in 2012. "They are celebrities here but unknown abroad."

"I like to compare Moscow today to New York in the Gatsby era," says the fair's director, Sandra Nedvetskaia, an intense, slender woman in a designer sheath dress who left her position at Christie's in Zurich to throw herself into the Russian art scene. "The rich are deciding how they should spend their money. And the parties certainly match up!" Although plunging oil prices have brought turbulence to Russia's economy, I could see what she meant: We were shouting over music at the Cosmoscw opening reception in a place called Door 19, a luxurious penthouse loft adorned with works by Damien Hirst and Jonathan Meese. Supermodel Natalia Vodianova was cutting up the dance floor—her Naked Heart Foundation had just held an art auction, raising money to help Russian children with disabilities.

When Zhukova founded Garage, at the age of 27, she seemed to come out of nowhere. The British press snarkily referred to her as "Abramovich's girlfriend," painting her as a dilettante and Garage as a vanity project. These days, few question her commitment to the arts. Apart from Garage, she has started an art magazine (also called *Garage*), helped fund the online auction site Artsy and supported a \$400 million renovation of a romantic "art island" called New Holland in St. Petersburg. (Still, she is pursued by her celebrity. At the press conference announcing the new Garage in Moscow, a Russian journalist asked her which American socialites she had met at Fashion Week in New York. "We are here to talk about art," Zhukova said politely.) Apart from the archive, Garage has made forays in almost every sphere of visual art, creating Russia's only system of grants for young artists and opening a 15,000-volume research library.

“Dasha has always been focused on art and museums as a way to think about larger issues of community and city building,” says Michael Govan, the director of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, where Zhukova has sat on the board since 2009. “Ever since I met her in her early 20s, she has had a passion for contemporary art and genuinely feels it can improve society. For many people, it is a link to the broader world and the creative spirit.”

The move to Gorky Park was a direct attempt to involve a skeptical Moscow public. “At the old Garage, there would sometimes be more workers than visitors,” says Belov. “Now Garage is thronged all day.” Apart from conferences and debates, a program where the public was invited to ask curators questions lured 30,000 visitors. There was even a Bring Your Grandmother to the Garage Day. “Being here has its positives and negatives,” says Zhukova. “People come in who don’t like contemporary art, or don’t know anything about it. We have to adjust the way we communicate.”

“We have made Garage into a real institution, not a toy,” boasts Belov, adding that funding will be less and less dependent on Zhukova and Abramovich. “Dasha and Roman wanted it to be more self-sustaining.” Corporate sponsorship, individual donations, foundation grants, store sales and entry fees now cover 30 percent of the museum’s operating costs, with the aim of 50 percent in five years. “Garage started out as a family project,” says Zhukova. “It has a different scale now, as a public institution that is privately funded.” The models, she says, are U.S. institutions such as the Whitney, Frick and Guggenheim rather than government-funded European museums. “It took Mrs. Whitney 25 years before her museum went public,” points out Garage’s chief curator Kate Fowle. “Garage is doing it right away.” And she notes that, despite early criticism, Zhukova is self-effacing in comparison to philanthropists who still like their names immortalized. “The museum is called Garage,” adds Fowle, “not The Zhukova.”

Not everyone is convinced that Garage is a harbinger of a new artistic florescence within Russia. “A few people in Moscow are prepared to consider modern art,” says Daria Palatkina, a correspondent for the *Art Newspaper Russia*, which launched in 2012. “But in Russia generally, most people have never even heard of Malevich’s *Black Square*,” she says, referring to the radically abstract painting that electrified Europe’s avant-garde in 1915 and remains the most famous modern Russian artwork. She worries that Garage’s attempt to lure the public is swimming against the current of Putin’s backward-looking regime, which could lead to an exodus of young artists. “Our government is very traditionalist. It turns to icons and the church. And as Russia isolates itself, it will be even harder for the people of Garage to do all the beautiful things they want to do.”

Tensions over Ukraine have begun to reverberate in the art world, with museum officials facing hesitation from foreign lenders. “Culture is like a bridge that can connect things,” says Belov. “But if we can’t arrange art loans, we will have problems. Now it’s OK, but I hope things will not get worse in the future.” When the museum opens in June, the main solo exhibition will be by Rirkrit Tiravanija; a Louise Bourgeois retrospective follows later in the year. For Zhukova, the future is rich with potential, with Russia still a wild frontier for contemporary art: “I want Garage to be where people, art and ideas meet to create history.”

On my last afternoon, Belov leads me back through Gorky Park to visit Garage’s next phase, an enormous structure known as the Hexagon. Built as the Machine Pavilion for the long-forgotten Soviet exposition of 1923, the building includes six vast wings connected together in a star. Right now, it’s just a ghostly skeleton with pigeons fluttering in the rafters—six gutted cathedrals dedicated to Russia’s tortured past. Belov explains that it will open after extensive restoration, at some period in the future.

“Every day, new things are happening in Moscow,” Belov muses. “I think within a decade, it could be as important an art center as New York or London.

“But this is Russia. You never know what will happen tomorrow.”