

Back in the USSR

A prodigal son of the Soviet Union rebuilds his career as an architect. (You don't know how lucky you are, Russia.)

BY TRACEY HUMMER

No one in his right mind would call Alexander Brodsky an emerging talent. The Russian avant-gardist, who was born in 1955, first came to notice in the 1970s as a paper architect, for whom the pen was mightier (or at least handier) than the trowel. In 1990, at the invitation of the SoHo gallery owner Ronald Feldman, he visited New York and stayed almost a decade. He became known for installation art, such as his 1999 "Grey Matters" exhibition at Feldman: "Nine works, large and small, simple and elaborate," noted *Art in America*. "All were some sort of gray: an enormous etching of a vast landscape of rubble; a cold metal bed..."


In 1996, he won a competition to transform an abandoned portion of Manhattan's Canal Street subway station into a lagoon.

Emerging, no. But Brodsky is blossoming into a new phase of his career. Back home and building for real on Russian soil, he is creating poetic structures that offer some relief to a landscape increasingly crushed by the brutish forces of development. One of the New Russia's most talked-about projects, according to Brodsky's architecture school classmate, Constantin Boym, is his Vodka Drinking Pavilion, completed in 2003 for a contemporary art festival at the Klyazama reservoir

near Moscow. Far from paper architecture, the pavilion went up without any working drawings at all. "I had this idea in my head to use old windows to build a building," Brodsky says. When a Moscow textile factory was being demolished, he hired workers to salvage about 30 wood-framed, multi-paned windows, and assembled them into a structure 6 yards long by 2.5 yards wide by 2.5 yards high. Total cost (for loading, hauling, and construction): \$500.

Brodsky's inspiration for the little shelter was a Japanese teahouse. He fitted it out for imbibing the distilled spirits that are Russia's





national beverage. "Once it was finished, I had to invent a ceremony," he says. "Nothing complex, just a bang-bang [i.e., toast]. It can last forever or until the participants fall down."

Painted white and posed at an angle that encourages sunlight to filter through the glass, the pavilion can be visited by appointment. It is designed to hold two people. A small table supports tiny enameled tin cups

with handles and a metal pot filled with vodka. During the Klyazama festival the vodka was free, however generosity didn't extend to the cups, which remain attached to the pot by ropes.

"Raw imagination not quite fully tamed" is how Feldman describes Brodsky's buildings. After five years of practice, his studio, which is housed in Moscow's derelict State Architecture Museum, has turned out inno-

vative restaurants, clubs, country houses, and residential interiors. "He brought his great imagination as a visual artist to the world of architecture," echoes Vitaly Komar, half of the former Russian conceptual art team Komar & Melamid.

Studio Brodsky's latest project is converting a 19th-century wine-bottling plant in Moscow into a multidisciplinary arts center. That a man who once drew futuristic visions is preoccupied with salvaging old structures that others are happy to raze is an irony as potent as vodka. But Brodsky brings an outsider's artistry to the job. "I believe he's the only person doing truly interesting work in architecture in Russia at the moment," says Boym. "He has no agenda...he's just doing what is in his heart." ✪

Tracey Hummer is a New York-based writer and editor covering art, architecture, and design.