



An Interview with Alexander Brodsky

Project Russia: Your father, the well-known artist and illustrator Savva Brodsky, came to art via architecture. You seem to be moving the other direction: from etchings and art installations to 'real' design. Does this mean that it's architecture that has the most appeal for you as a means of self-expression?

Alexander Brodsky: It's difficult to say... My father began as an artist. He went to art school in Leningrad and intended to practise fine art. However, at a certain point he made the decision to study at an architecture college. He spent more than 20 years in architecture and designed a large number of buildings, but never gave up graphic art. And in the end, it was graphic art that became his main profession. I too went to art school and thought I'd become a painter. But then, influenced by my father's stories about what a fine place MArkHI is, I went there. This didn't mean at all that I wanted to become an architect – simply, I found it great fun there. I had loads of friends, a band called 'Luchshie gody' ('Best Years'), etc. I was taught by some brilliant teachers – Turkus, Barshch, Barkhin. But, being young and stupid, I was unable to appreciate them for what they were worth. It seemed to me that our main occupation was drawing merry pictures for Komsomol conferences and New Year's celebrations. Then Ilya Utkin and I started working on the border between fine art and architecture.

Az W: In the 90's you spent several years in the USA, first being invited in 1990 by the New York gallery director Ronald Feldman. How do you remem-

ber this time, switching between the West and East? And what is it that you took with you in coming back to Russia, finally becoming an architect?

AB: We started visiting the US in 1989 with Ilya Utkin, putting on an exhibition at Ronald Feldman's and some other places. New York was a really great place to visit – beautiful and interesting. We went back and forth for several years. In 1996 I went to NY with my family for a couple of months to set up an exhibition. And we stayed for almost four years. It was very interesting and a very hard experience to make ends meet. I was doing different kinds of things — sculpture, installations, graphics... During these years I made many good friends, so my connection with NY is still very strong.

PR: And eventually you became an architect...

AB: I gradually became one. It took me more than 20 years to start replying 'architect' when asked what my profession was. For many years I was almost certain I'd never actually begin building anything – that this was not my occupation, but one for other people, for those who fit in in some special way. To be honest, I still think so even today. It's the same as driving a car. All my life, I was sure I'd never be able to drive; it seemed to me that there were special people who were able to do so, but that I wasn't one of them. Then it turned out there was nothing much to it. And this amazes me to this day. I've been driving for a long time and I'm still full of wonder: I get into the car, turn the ignition, the vehicle starts moving, and all of a sudden I'm driving... It's the same with architecture. We've been building things for six years now, and I still just can't get used to the thought that I'm actually an architect. It amazes me.

PR: Architectural practice always tend to expand spatially – from a small to a large scale. And not just from plans on paper to the realization of a design in bricks and mortar, but also from small structures to structures that are increasingly large. Is the desire to create something big something you're familiar with or are you completely satisfied with work for private clients?

AB: I am satisfied with what I'm doing at the moment. I don't mean with the results – that's always problematic – but with the process itself. The fact that I am approached by serious-minded people who want me to design a house for them is much more important for me than the physical dimensions of the house. I get great pleasure from fussing over small details, although they can sometimes prove fatiguing. It's probably why architects should sometimes design enormous buildings: in order to give their eyes a rest from the small stuff.

PR: You get involved in all the details?

AB: I try to, at any rate. For the moment, the volume of work commissioned from us allows me to think about every skirting board and have my say about every little nail. But it's becoming more and more difficult.

Az W: How do you decide which materials to use in your projects? You seem to favor basic materials like wood and brick. Are you at all interested in new building materials?

AB: It's true, I prefer things like wood, brick or concrete — materials that become more beautiful in time. Usually I don't have to choose the materials - the decision comes with the first sketches. I like glass and metal as well and I think I'll use some modern materials in the future.

PR: Might it be said that your finished buildings are an absolute reflection of your creative will?

AB: For the most part, yes. After all, most of my clients come to me for a particular reason. They more or less know what they want. So there's never any need for serious compromises.

PR: Do they regard you as an architect or an artist?

AB: My first two clients – Marat Guelman and Sasha Yezhkov – knew me only as an artist. However, they were aware that I have a degree in architecture and decided to risk it. The first to do so was Guelman, who commissioned me to design the interior of his own apartment. I had previously been one of the artists exhibited in his gallery. Almost at the same time Yezhkov offered me the chance to design a summer restaurant that was to be built on the shores of the Pirogovskoe Reservoir. These commissions launched my career as an architect. Half of Moscow has seen Guelman's apartment. The restaurant too became a popular spot and the first in an entire series of structures we've built at Pirogovo. Interestingly, these two commissions are linked with one another: Yezhkov got to know me when he bought an art object from my exhibition at the Guelman Gallery. A chain reaction followed: the designs were published, I received new proposals, and gradually a circle of clients formed.

PR: Do you follow a specific method in working on a brief? What do you start with: an image, functions, structural considerations, context?

AB: My method is intuitive more than anything. I have no principles – at least, when it comes to style. I suppose architects should have some guiding principle, but I've never formulated it, declared it, or set it down on paper. And I've never told anyone about my principles. Although there have been moments when in my head I've tried to string together a few words on this subject.

Az W: It is obvious that hand drawing plays a key role for you. But is the next step in testing and developing the spatial concept of a design the working model?

AB: Of course I always start with drawings, but in some stages of the project, models become very important. My first building, 95° Restaurant, was built with no technical drawings at all, using only a model. But unfortunately in many cases we don't have time to make models.

PR: How accurate are art and architecture critics when they write about your creations? How happy are you with the way your work is perceived?

AB: I don't know. It's not often I read these texts. And if I do read them, I try not to pay too much attention to the meaning of what's written about me. If it's praise, that's fine. And if they criticize me, well, you take the rough with smooth... It's a different matter when your close friends have been asked to write about you. That's touching.

PR: So as an author you've already said everything you wanted to say in your buildings?

AB: That's how it should be, ideally. But I don't really care if I'm misunderstood. Is it really worth spending time worrying about someone's incorrect interpretations? It's best to use your energy to create something new instead.

PR: Do you set strategic goals and tasks for the office or do you prefer to swim with the flow?

AB: We've been operating for almost six years and we're constantly saying we should work out some kind of strategy. I'm confident that once we work one out, it'll be the best strategy in the world. But for the moment we go with the flow. But it's not just any old flow – it's the flow that we have chosen for ourselves. Previously, our office didn't seem much like an architect's office to me – it was more like a 'club for aficionados of architecture', a place where you could drop in to take a cup of tea and do a spot of drawing. But now everyone here slogs their guts out.

PR: Do you personally use a computer in your work?

AB: No, that's something I'm unable to do – and I've no desire to learn. I draw in pencil on tracing paper, and that's quite enough for me.

PR: And then you sit next to one of your team and direct them while they draw on the computer?

AB: It's a wonderful, incomparable feeling – sitting behind someone's back and saying: 'More to the right, more to the left. No, not that way.' And

then seeing how your brilliant idea takes shape on the screen. In the end I discovered that this passion of mine doesn't give the person who has to do the drawing any particular pleasure. And can even prove a source of slight irritation to him or her. But there are still moments when I can't deny myself this pleasure.

Az W: How important is it for you spend time at the building site?

AB: Very important. It's amazing to see how a sketch, an idea becomes a building. For me personally the important thing is that there is always a small chance to change something during the construction if you see a mistake. I've done that many times.

PR_Az W: Are you attracted by teaching as a job? Have you been invited to teach at MarchI?

AB: Several years ago, I happened to drop in to MarchI in search of some quality drawing paper, I think it was, and was unexpectedly approached by some very serious people with an offer to teach. I was not at all ready for this, and said as much. What could I teach them? There are only ten ways to open a bottle of beer.

But last year I suddenly changed my mind and tried teaching. It was one semester in École Spéciale d'Architecture in Paris. It was nice and interesting and very different as well. Now I have at least a bit of experience, but I'm not sure I'm going to do it again soon.

PR: It's a well established opinion that the main leitmotif of your work is nostalgia. As one critic wrote, 'Brodsky has turned his nostalgia into an artistic technique'. What kind of nostalgia is this?

AB: This widely accepted opinion arose, I think, because over the course of years of being an artist I've spent quite a lot of time depicting various ruins. I've drawn ruins together with Ilya Utkin, and I've drawn them on my own. I've fashioned ruins out of clay and made "ruined" interiors and installations. Possibly, the reason for this was that the main problem I experienced while studying at MarchI – and afterwards too – was my complete inability to understand modern architecture. I bust my gut trying to understand how and why I should like it, but was unable to do so. But I had always adored Piranesi and consequently Roman ruins – and all other kinds too. For me this was Architecture that I could love. When necessary, like all the other students, I would go to the library, take a magazine, and copy designs by, say, Paul Rudolph or James Stirling without feeling the slightest bit of affection for them, not understanding why I was doing it, and not believing that there lay something important behind it. I was likewise unable to understand or like Russian Con-

structivism. In order to take my mind off my own failings and calm down, I would draw ruins.

PR: There are, though, people for whom this has no appeal. Instead of ruins, they draw new buildings in the Classical style. Mikhail Filippov, say, or your former partner, Ilya Utkin.

AB: They are undisguised heirs to the Palladian tradition, and for this they deserve to be respected. As for me, I was never very fond of pure Neoclassicism. In any case, not so fond as to swear allegiance on Palladio's grave to the order system. I continued to feel a tender love for all Classical architecture, but at the same time, dreamed of loving contemporary architecture as well. And in the end, I achieved this. Here I have to give credit to my old friend Eugene Ass, who played a key role in my education in this respect. Whenever we drank and talked together, he would always show me something that had recently been built in different parts of the world, and this always hit the mark and caught my imagination. Gradually, I gained a point of view, acquired my own taste and favourite buildings, favourite architects.

PR: So you developed an understanding of contemporary architecture at the moment when you became a practising architect?

AB: No, a little earlier. Otherwise, I'd have been unlikely to take that first step.

Az W: Can it be said that your more recent projects already have lost a bit of this nostalgic note your earlier projects were so-said influenced by?

AB: It's difficult to answer this kind of question about my own projects. I know that my works are changing and I think it's good.

PR: Are you interested in recent trends in architecture – to be more specific, in organic or bubble-like forms?

AB: To be honest with you, no. For the moment, at any rate, I've got to grow some more before I can appreciate organic forms. But who knows: maybe some day I'll start appreciating bubbles too...

PR_AZW: In various interviews, you've advanced some rather curious criteria by which to measure the value of structures you've designed. The main thing, it seems, is that a building should not irritate you. Do you ever feel excited when you come into contact with contemporary architecture?

AB: Not often, but occasionally, yes. Unfortunately, the few modern structures that I find exciting I've seen mainly in photographs. For instance, works by Peter Märkli, Bienefeld, and Zumthor. I have, though, been lucky enough

to see some buildings in the flesh – for instance, Asplund’s library in Stockholm or Lewerenz’s church in the same city. I’ve realized that buildings that are delightful when seen in a photo are not always delightful when seen in the flesh, and vice-versa. Once I was walking around London at night with a friend when he dragged me into the courtyard of the British Museum. It was unexpected and amazing, although I had, of course, already heard about this work by Norman Foster. I have to say, I found this space ravishing. And a couple of years ago I was very lucky to visit a building I knew from books and wanted to see for a long time, Peter Märkli’s La Congiunta Museum in Giornico. It’s an amazing piece of architecture and I’m really happy that I could spend some time near it and inside it.

PR: What about the futurophobia that is usually ascribed to you? Is it possible to be a futurophobe and yet delight in Foster’s high-tech at the same time?

AB: ‘Futurophobia’ was the name given to my exhibition at the Guelman Gallery in 1997. At the time I was sure I had invented this word. Even now I haven’t actually looked to see whether it’s there in the dictionary. So it was more a beautiful name that fit the contents of the exhibition than a declaration of my true feelings. Although, if I think about it, there is probably something like this lurking in the depths of my being. I see how much of that which is dear to my mind and heart has disappeared. And there is less and less that is interesting to replace it. This undoubtedly gives rise to both futurophobia and nostalgia.

PR: You mean what’s happening in Moscow?

AB: Mainly in Moscow, but not just Moscow. I recently learned, for instance, that old Peking has been all but destroyed. All that’s left is souvenir-like fragments for tourists. This is very sad. It means that another wonderful place I haven’t had time to visit is gone.

PR: Have you ever been approached by a client with a proposal for a ‘demolition and reconstruction’ job?

AB: Not yet. Most clients, it seems, have a degree of intuition. They sense which architects it’s worth approaching to do which job, so they don’t waste their time.

Az W: How often do you still get involved in art projects?

AB: Unfortunately, much less often than I’d like. Combining art with work as an architect is very difficult: there’s just not enough time. But I need to do art projects and I try to take advantage of every possibility. 2009 and 2010

were two years when I managed to make many different things; the most important art project this year for me will be the exhibition in Vienna.

PR: In your art projects, you have always been interested in cities as a theme, which also made your invitation to take part in the Architecture Biennale in Venice in 2006 – where the theme was ‘cities’ – quite natural.

AB: All my life I’ve been depicting cities. I depicted them as an artist, but without getting involved in specific questions of urban design with its sociological and traffic problems, etc. I am enthralled by the existence of the city as an object, a cultural phenomenon. The poetic side of cities appeals to me. I enjoy inventing and drawing cities – in the same way that people draw dreams.

PR: And which cities give rise to the sweetest dreams?

AB: Moscow is my favourite city in all respects. Right now, it’s real torture for me to see the daily disappearance of this city, which I’ve always loved and continue to love. For the last 25 years this has given me the most pain. But talking about it doesn’t change anything and brings no relief.

PR: In one of the interviews you said that paper architecture was accompanied by a feeling of festivity boosted by a large degree of alcohol consumption. ‘We never managed to concentrate properly, thank God’, you said. Have your feelings changed since then? Is there a place for festivity, humor, jokes in architecture today? Or is it a profoundly serious process?

AB: Life then was completely different. We were young, out for a good time, unburdened by any feeling of responsibility. Apart from enjoying ourselves, there really was nothing for us to do. We drank, painted pictures, sometimes received awards for them, and then drank even more. That’s how I remember that period of my life. Since then, life has changed radically. I have children now. Any form of responsibility slightly reduces the level of festivity in the blood... And yet what I do now is also a kind of festivity. The fact that I have young people sitting in my studio is an important part of that feeling. They could all be my children, and this appeals to me tremendously. It would probably be difficult for me to work with people the same age as me or older. The way I feel, I could be back in about the year 1972. And these kids around me help to maintain the illusion. We have drinking sessions every so often. Perhaps the most unpleasant part of the situation is that I have to get up early. First thing in the morning is a difficult time to feel festive, but over the course of the day the feeling grows – and by evening it’s in full swing.

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