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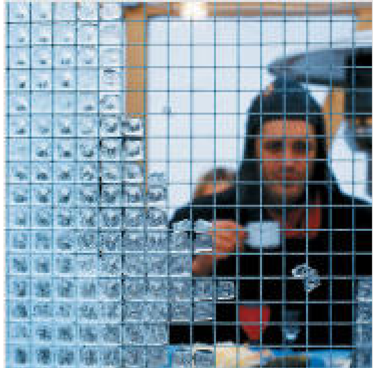

Ice Pavilion
In 2003 Brodsky constructed an ice-crusted metal cage on a frozen lake. It was a glowing bar until the spring thaw melted the ice; the rest was carted away.
Photo by Yuri Palmin/courtesy Alexander Brodsky

Photo by Yuri Palmin/courtesy Alexander Brodsky

MAGAZINE

Return of the Prodigal Son

Can Alexander Brodsky reinvent Russian architecture?

By Mark Lamster
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If you're searching for Russian architect Alexander Brodsky, your best bet is to duck into a crumbling wing of Moscow's Schusev State Museum of Architecture, climb a dilapidated grand staircase, and then, in darkness, follow a shaky catwalk to a heavy wooden door. Open it and you will find a studio that is bright and warm and pleasantly cluttered, a sequestered haven in a city that often seems at war with itself. You are also likely to find Brodsky--Sasha to his friends--a small man with deep-set eyes, a crew-cut head, and a closely cropped beard that together give him an almost uncanny resemblance to Vincent van Gogh.

The effect may not be entirely unintended. At the age of 14, Brodsky was tossed out of the Soviet Union's most prestigious art school for imitating the Dutch painter's colorful palette. That was in the late 1960s, when drab socialist realism was the only style sanctioned by the state. A certain refusal to give in to the forces of dreary conformity has characterized Brodsky's modus operandi ever since, an intransigence that has not always accrued to his professional advantage. But now, at the age of 51, he has secured a reputation as Russia's leading avant-garde architect. More impressively he has begun to realize a dream he long thought impossible: to build.

That just six years ago Brodsky was trying to survive as an installation artist while squatting in a former factory in Jersey City makes the story of his emergence improbable if not entirely remarkable. In fact he has spent the better part of his career as a nonpracticing architect, and his catalog of built work includes only a handful of projects, all completed in the last few years: some interior renovations, a series of houses, a banya (Russian bathhouse), and several restaurants. But these projects have a special force, and their impact has exceeded their rather modest number.

The attraction is Brodsky's unique ability to assimilate traditional forms, materials, and building techniques into a modern but characteristically imaginative architecture. "I call it the New Russian Architecture," says Kiril Ass, an architect in Brodsky's studio. "It's about using old materials, local materials, free of modern ideology."

"He has an incredible reputation in Russian architecture circles, and those people don't mince words," says Constantin Boym, a longtime friend who studied with Brodsky at the Moscow Architectural Institute in the 1970s. "When it comes to Brodsky, there is a reverence--like he is our genius." His status as something of a national treasure is confirmed by his studio's address in the Museum of Architecture's attic, a unique grant bestowed by the museum's director, David Sarkisyan, one of Brodsky's many fans.

Now is a good time for an influential visionary to start building: Russian architecture

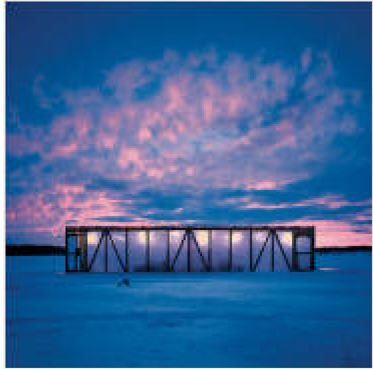

Photo by Yuri Palmin/courtesy Alexander Brodsky

is certainly in need of a corrective. For more than a decade, Moscow--Brodsky's muse--has been prey to an unregulated and largely corrupt building industry. "Everything is possible here," Brodsky grumbled on a recent tour of the city. "If someone has enough money to tear down St. Basil's [Cathedral] and build an office tower with an underground garage in Red Square, it will happen."

The vulnerability of the city, and in particular its older industrial spaces, has long been a theme in Brodsky's work. Coma, an installation project produced in 2000 for Moscow's Marat Guelman Gallery, posed an imaginary city--clearly modeled on the Russian capital--of unfired clay buildings standing delicately in a pool of pitch-black machine oil.

That liquid may have been opaque, but Brodsky's metaphor was transparent. Oil is the force driving Moscow development; the city is awash in petrodollars, and the architectural face of that money is a kitschy and turgid historicism that conflates schlocky construction with the symbols of Soviet and pre-Soviet glory. (It is often described as Neo-Stalinism.) Architecture's glitterati, from Rem Koolhaas to Zaha Hadid, have also arrived on the scene, bringing a sense of global chic to a new Russian audience besotted with luxury brands and a desire to equal, if not surpass, the West in its own idiom.

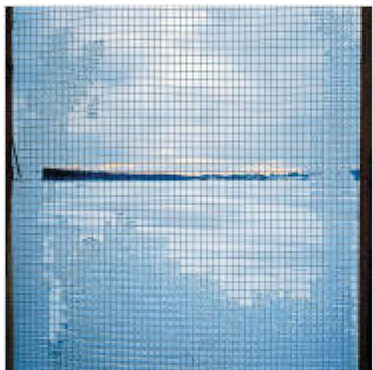

Photo by Yuri Palmin/courtesy Alexander Brodsky

The unsettled situation has fostered something of an intellectual impasse. What, exactly, might a new and authentically Russian architecture be? For those hoping to find a distinctive voice somewhere between the crassness of Moscow's more rapacious developers and the glamour-infused Modernism of the West, the answer lies in the work of Alexander Brodsky.

Brodsky has in fact held a special place in Russian architectural culture since the late 1970s, when he first came to public attention as a leading member of the "paper architects," a loosely knit group of architecture-school graduates who had abandoned professional practice when faced with the prospect of joining the soulless state building machine. Supporting themselves through foreign competitions, theatrical design, illustration work, and odd jobs, they privately created works of unfettered imagination. Brodsky, then working in collaboration with Ilya Utkin, produced a series of obsessively worked allegorical etchings that cataloged the physical and emotional tolls of the modern city, but with a melancholy sense of the absurd: their *Columbarium Habitabile*, for instance, proposed a vast concrete mausoleum to which houses set for demolition could be removed and stacked on shelves like so many objects in a cabinet of curiosity.

Apshu
Brodsky designed this restaurant to resemble a Soviet-era communal apartment.
Photo by Yuri Palmin/courtesy Alexander Brodsky

The freedoms of glasnost allowed Brodsky to travel to the United States in 1990 at the invitation of New York gallerist Ronald Feldman, who had previously introduced the Russian artists Ilya Kabakov, Vitaly Komar, and Alex Melamid to the American public. After shuttling between the two countries for a few years, he moved to the United States in 1996, living hand to mouth while completing a series of well-received public projects. That year the Public Art Fund chose him to transform an unused section of tracks in the Canal Street subway station into a shadowy Venetian lagoon. For nearly two months riders transferring lines were treated to the sight of eight life-size gondolas carrying tin-and-plywood cutout passengers in a 5,000-gallon tank. Three years later, in Pittsburgh, he created *Palazzo Nudo*, a 55-foot-tall house-shaped metal skeleton with fragments from the city's demolished structures piled in its center--a rueful commentary on historical erasure that seemed to realize the ideas of his earliest paper projects.

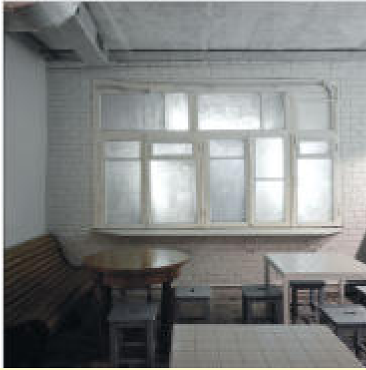

Photo by Yuri Palmin/courtesy Alexander Brodsky

Critical success did not translate into commercial success, however, and Brodsky soon found himself at a turning point in his career. "I never wanted to stay in the United States forever," he says, and by 1999 he was homesick. He returned to Moscow on the eve of the millennium, celebrating the new century's arrival on an all but empty Aeroflot jet thousands of feet over the Atlantic. It was a bittersweet homecoming; the revived Russian economy meant that he could resume his stillborn architectural career. But doing that would severely curtail his career as an artist. "I realized I had to make a decision," he said. "At heart I am an architect. It's what I always wanted to do."

The transition back to his old profession was difficult. Though his reputation led to a handful of commissions, completing those jobs took a physical and mental toll. "I almost went mad," Brodsky says. "I was near a serious mental problem. I'd never had this responsibility, and I was alone. It was my first experience communicating with workers and clients." Adding a partner, Yaroslav Kovaltchuk, helped with the logistics. And seeing his first works completed affirmed his decision. "I'm not disappointed."

Photo by Yuri Palmin/courtesy Alexander Brodsky

Moscow, so often impersonal and frenetic, feels more like a large, unwieldy village from the passenger's seat of Brodsky's rusty gray Lada. At any moment he is likely to swerve across several lanes of traffic to hail a passing friend (they appear with astonishing regularity) or point out a favorite building (often something old and industrial). If you are lucky, the destination of your drive will be his home, a studio garret--it belonged to his father, an architect and book illustrator--that he shares with his wife, Masha, and their two children, Sasha and Masha. (His stepdaughter, yet another Sasha, is also a regular.) The apartment is crammed with an organized chaos of found objects, books, and art projects. On the walls are his father's paintings, and in a corner the iron press used to make the prints that first brought Brodsky recognition. An overriding philosophy gradually becomes evident: an informality that belies careful thought, a love of physical objects and the processes of making them, and a respect for the quotidian history of the individual.

This same philosophy is evident in Brodsky's architectural projects, in particular one of his favorite haunts, Apshu (2002), a restaurant-club hidden in the basement of a nondescript building in Moscow's Zamoskvoreche neighborhood. The space is divided as if it were a Soviet-era communal apartment, and the rooms are framed by windows salvaged from local junkyards. Though it trades on the architecture of the past, there is no hint of kitsch, and it is entirely free of the academicism that characterizes so much postmodern design. "It has this nostalgic feel, but it's not formalistic," Boym says. "His work doesn't have a style--yet because of this narrative, theatrical attitude, it fits very well together. You always enter into a different world with Brodsky."

Banya
This Russian bathhouse is equipped with birch branches that are slapped and rubbed on bathers to stimulate circulation.

Brodsky again appropriated the windows of a condemned industrial building --a nineteenth-century textile factory--for his Vodka Ceremony Pavilion, a luminous folly comprising nothing but repurposed windows and a few wooden braces, all whitewashed and assembled into a small hut. Built in 2004 for the Art-Klyazma festival, it was equipped with only the bare essentials for its function: a small table and a pair of tin cups tethered to a basin filled with spirits.

The Vodka Ceremony Pavilion is one of a series of structures the architect has designed at the Klyazma Reservoir, a Soviet-era retreat some 12 miles from Moscow that has been developed into a private residential enclave of upscale summer cottages and service buildings. Most striking of this group is the restaurant 95

Photo by Mark Lamster

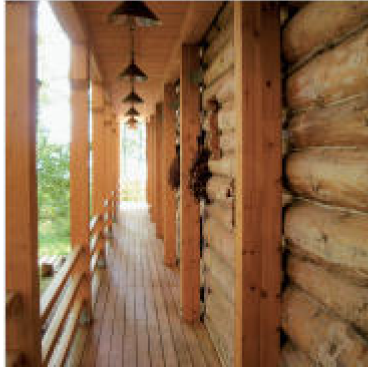

Photo by Mark Lamster

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Degrees, little more than a scaffold of timber posts and beams that cantilevers over an artificial lake. Tables are set on a staggered framework of decks and covered pavilions connected by nautical stairs and ladders. The establishment takes its name from the piers that support the scaffold; these are set slightly askew, both to mirror the surrounding woods and to impart a sense of precarious energy to the space.

Brodsky is also responsible for a more literally ephemeral work of architecture on the same lake; in winter 2003 a team of laborers under his direction trudged out onto its frozen surface and, in the frigid conditions, assembled a rectangular mesh cage about 40 feet long and 8 feet high that they proceeded to hose down with warm water. That water turned to ice, and when lit from its interior, the structure--a bar--glowed like a warm jewel. With spring's thaw the cage was carted away; the rest sank to the bottom of the lake.

A certain communion with the environment is evident in Brodsky's other projects at Klyazma, in particular a *banya* (2004) constructed of raw logs farmed locally and joined with a traditional binding system of natural fibers. A small wood-frame house (2004) just a few minutes away incorporates its forest setting with a sweeping picture window and a canopy of grass that sits atop a vaulted roof.

Brodsky's largest project to date, the Vinzavod Arts Center, is a privately developed complex for the arts set in a decommissioned wine factory that had been constructed in phases, the earliest dating to the beginning of the nineteenth century. When the first phase of the conversion is complete in September, the 215,000-square-foot facility will introduce galleries, public spaces, shops, and restaurants into a rapidly gentrifying area of Moscow. Reanimating the city's industrial heritage for the arts would seem a task ideally suited to Brod-sky, but it is a daunting challenge nonetheless, not least for its shoestring budget, still undetermined even as work has begun.

The larger question as to what influence Brodsky might have on Russian architecture remains open. "I'd be very interested to see what happens if he gets a skyscraper," Boym says. Brodsky, for his part, is not sanguine about that possibility. "I'm not thinking about expanding. It's nice to have an office this size," he says. Anyway, he's happy to continue on in his own idiosyncratic direction. "I try to do something individual," Brodsky says. "It's my own program."

Vodka Ceremony Pavilion
Designed in 2004 for the Art-Klyazma festival, the Vodka Ceremony Pavilion cost less than $500 to construct.

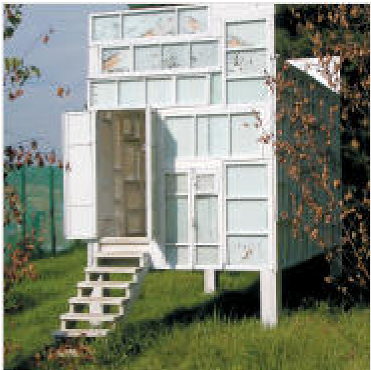
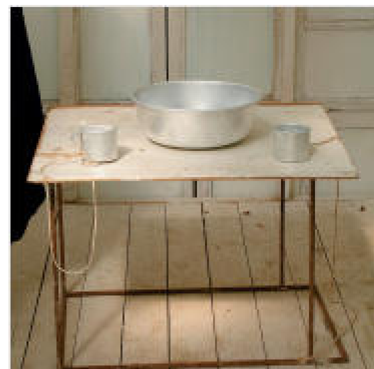


Photo by Yuri Palmin/courtesy Alexander Brodsky

The whitewashed windows are

Inside his Vodka Ceremony



The metal basin holds the

not entirely opaque, lending the hut a warm glow at sunset.
Photo by Yuri Palmin/courtesy Alexander Brodsky

Pavilion, Brodsky raises one of the tin cups tethered to a nearby table, the interior's sole piece of furniture.
Photo by Yuri Palmin/courtesy Alexander Brodsky

pavilion's namesake liquor.
Photo by Yuri Palmin/courtesy Alexander Brodsky

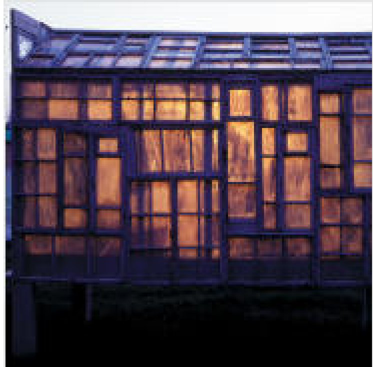
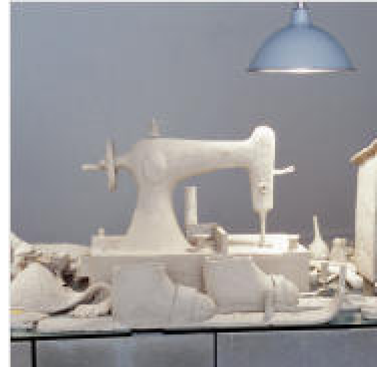


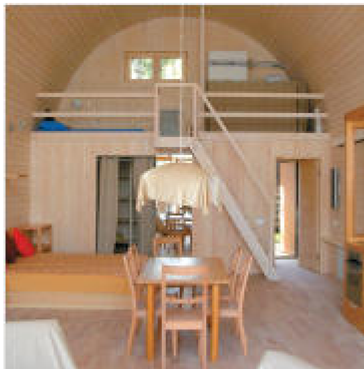
Photo by Yuri Palmin/courtesy Alexander Brodsky

Coma
For *Coma*, Brodsky built a miniature model city--markedly similar to Moscow, where it was displayed--atop a slick of motor oil fed from intravenous tubes.
Photo by Igor Palmin/courtesy Alexander Brodsky



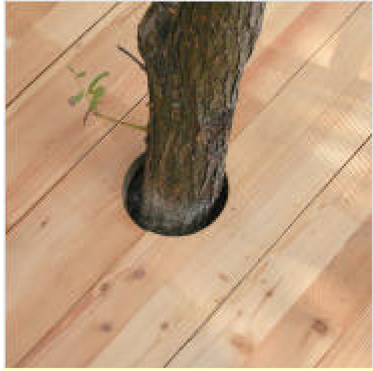
Grey Matter
His *Grey Matter* installation, displayed in New York, featured a collection of dreamlike unfired clay objects, including toy cars, buttons, and a dog watching TV.
Photo by courtesy Alexander Brodsky

Palazzo Nudo
Palazzo Nudo (*Nude Palace*), an art project in Pittsburgh, consisted of a five-story-high metal scaffolding surrounding a pyramid of rubble--fragments of the city's demolished historic buildings.
Photo by courtesy Alexander Brodsky



Klyazma House
In this lakeside residence, a U-shaped roof creates a high-ceilinged interior.

Photo by Mark Lamster



Cutout spaces in the deck and porch roof integrated birch trees into the structure though they were later cut down.
Photo by Mark Lamster

Brodsky also designed the house's built-in staircase drawers.
Photo by Mark Lamster

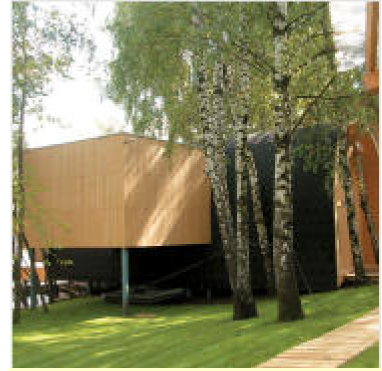


Photo by Mark Lamster

95 Degrees
A staggered series of platforms, supported by a network of wooden scaffolding, gives the 95 Degrees restaurant a slightly tilted cantilever over the Klyazma Reservoir.
Photo by Yuri Palmin/courtesy Alexander Brodsky and Oleg Ovsy

The structure was built based on Brodsky's sketches rather than on formal building plans, and has an estimated area of 3,700 square feet, including open terraces, a covered pavilion, and a glass-and–galvanized steel kitchen.
Photo by Mark Lamster

Closed during the winter months, the restaurant serves traditional Russian cuisine and is, notes an architect in Brodsky's studio, "quite expensive."
Photo by Mark Lamster

Photo by Yuri Palmin/courtesy Alexander Brodsky and Oleg Ovsy