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Bob Taylor/Tribune-Review



Alacant's Brindley stands near his "Palazzo Nudo" installation at the corner of Seventh Street and Penn Avenue in Pittsburgh's cultural district. The construction is based on the silhouette print above. At right is a detailed view of the architectural remnants that are arranged inside the structure.



Phil G. Peters/Tribune-Review

An ARCHITECTURE of the **imagination**

Alexandr Brodsky constructs solid and paper monuments in the Cultural District.

Alexandr Brodsky first showed his work in Pittsburgh in a joint exhibition at the Pittsburgh Center for the Arts in 1991 with his then-collaborator, Ilya Utkin. This is his first solo exhibition in the city, at the Wood Street Galleries, Downtown (although it bears many resemblances to the joint work shown in 1991), and it coincides with the completion of Brodsky's first major public sculpture installation in the United States, his "Palazzo Nudo," which has been commissioned by the Pittsburgh Cultural Trust. It is situated at the corner of Seventh Street and Penn Avenue in the Cultural District, Downtown.

Brodsky was trained in Moscow as an architect, and in the etchings and drypoints that make up the greater part of the exhibition at the Wood Street Galleries, a sure, if archaic, sense of the plastic qualities of architecture is realized in two-dimensional form. It is the language of the past that is brought to bear in these prints, most particularly the classical forms of Greece and Rome, somewhat filtered by a Russian sensibility. In the earlier show at the Pittsburgh Center for the Arts, one of the prints exhibited was of the interior of a "Columbarium Habitabile." A columbarium, which literally means "dovecote," is also the Roman term given to an underground sepulchre filled with niches that contain cinerary urns. In Brodsky and Utkin's version of the columbarium, the niches contain models of redundant houses, suggesting an elegiac comment on the state of architecture. But the columbarium has a certain Italian quality to it, a feature of much Soviet architecture and urban planning.

It is difficult not to be reminded of some of the etchings produced in 18th-century Rome by G.B. Piranesi in a series of monumental works aimed at commemorating the magnificence of ancient Rome, and Brodsky acknowledges the connection. Although many Piranesi prints are exact representations of the Roman ruins he encountered (often reinvigorated at Roman churches), other series are more speculative, re-creating the course of the ancient aqueducts from Lake Albano to Rome, imagining the idealized plan of a great city or, in the "Grotteschi," an early series of four prints published circa 1745, reflecting on the nature of ruins. All these, particularly the "Grotteschi," are relevant to his "Palazzo Nudo."

As did Piranesi, Brodsky uses etching and, less commonly, drypoint, to achieve his effects. One

silk-screened image, printed in colors, is shown in the exhibition but is a little at odds with the body of the work. His editioning of his prints is small and almost haphazard.

Brodsky's architectural training may explain his preoccupation with formal volumes and his attention to the structural elements in building. Basilican domes are supported with temporary structures that seem to belie the actual properties of the main buildings. Are they stable or destined to collapse? Much of the work on show at Wood Street is the result of subtle fantasy somewhat touched by visionary concerns. Much of the work is incapable of being executed, or Brodsky is indifferent to the possibility. These are, quite literally, works of architecture on paper. It is a moot point whether they could be described as romantic (as Piranesi's work is often described as proto-romantic).

"Palazzo Nudo" is thus a rare phenomenon for Brodsky, in which his work ceases to be merely conceptual but is translated into a monumental installation. Although it was not part of his original plan, the structure as completed will be closely connected with the urban fabric of Pittsburgh, for it incorporates a good deal of carefully (and sometimes not so carefully) preserved architectural fragments from buildings demolished in the city over the years. Brodsky's original plan, judging from a photograph of a model for the scheme, anticipated a pyramid of broken building materials, as if one of his imaginary domes had actually collapsed.

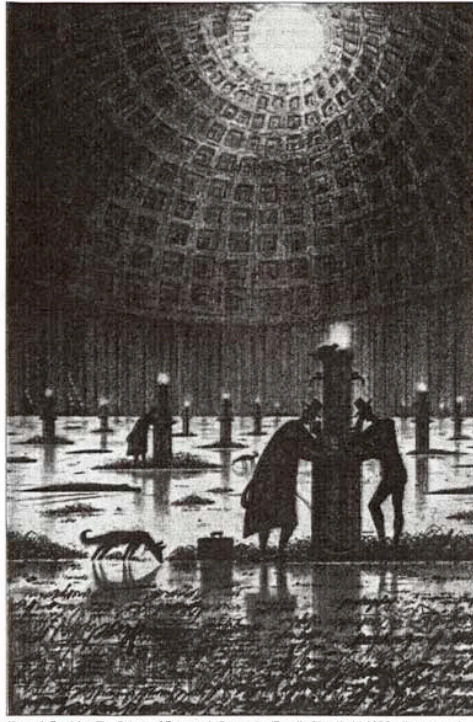
The work fits into the corner of the site on Penn and Seventh. It is pyramidal in form, surrounded by the vertical shafts of scaffolding. The fragments of architectural detail are piled up over the pyramid, and a system of lighting is to be installed beneath the structure. Thus realized, it will become a monument to the architecture of the city, but an ambivalent one. Like the ruins of ancient Rome, which are both inspiring and unbearable.

The artist may not have intended one inference that Pittsburghers are at liberty to draw. Some few blocks away from the Cultural District, urban planners have their eye on substantial tracts of land, heavily built with facades of the same type of material piled up by Brodsky... marble cornices, glazed terra-cotta details fragments of sculpture. As yet they are intact, handsome and irreplaceable. One can only hope that they do not find their way into a similar pile of historical debris.

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GRAHAM SHEARING



Alexandr Brodsky: "The Palace of Everyone's Prosperity (Detail of Interior)," 1998, silk-screen print.