

Interview

→ Although 'already' 40+, Oleg Drozdov represents a new, promising generation of Ukrainian architects. Having started his own practice in 1997, he now heads a company of more than 40 employees. Based in Kharkov, Drozdov & Partners are deeply integrated into European processes, not only by the designs they produce, but also by continuous cooperation with architects from different European countries.



Architectural Ambulancer

In Ukraine, where people pay millions to spend their lives in 'historical fakes', a European-oriented architect like **Oleg Drozdov** is seen as an exotic exception, a miracle. Besides his contextually sensitive and socially responsible designs, Oleg is well-known for his public activities and international collaborations. When founded 10 years ago, Drozdov & Partners started off with interior design, now they work at an urban scale in several of the biggest Ukrainian cities, producing positive changes in physical surroundings as well as in professional circles. Kseniya Dmitrenko investigates the intellectual background of Drozdov's work.

UKRAINE — KSENIYA DMITRENKO, PHOTOGRAPHY: ANDREI AVDEENKO

Kseniya Dmitrenko: How do you manage to make contemporary architecture in this country?

Oleg Drozdov: We have no skills to do anything else. And there has never been any desire or idea to change for commercial or any other reasons.

KD: I think we should explain to readers what we mean by 'contemporary architecture' and how it differs from what is currently being built in Ukraine.

OD: First of all, there is a kind of contemporary lifestyle and for this lifestyle there exists an 'envelope' which is called contemporary architecture. Secondly, contemporary architecture deals with the notion of the void, something that is located between the volumes – this is what we could call space in architecture. And finally, contemporary architecture cannot exist without living scenarios, attention to people's lives and so on. Ukraine now is an isolated island and Ukrainian architecture is one of the most internationally isolated areas of Ukrainian society. Actually, we should talk about the socio-political situation and architecture as its direct representation. We live in a post-socialist society that has reverted to feudal tendencies and values. Accordingly, the favourite architectural typology is castle-like and conservative. At the same time these projects display evident Soviet characteristics. In general we still have a very long way to go for real democracy.

KD: What is real democracy?

OD: When most of the society realizes it has instruments to influence social processes and the living environment. Currently there are no such instruments in Ukraine. In the Ukrainian context we speak about design and construction, not architecture. The best architects or developers are those who manage to create the maximum building mass; qualitative criteria are virtually absent. This commercial approach has no relationship to architecture at all.

KD: What might motivate Ukrainian architects to make architecture, rather than commercial projects?

OD: Well, actions are based on values. I want to live in a democratic society, in a friendly environment, I want those who are set on making money to find a compromise between their commercial interests and society's interests. This is the kind of environment I want to live in. On the other hand, there is what I call 'our history', which is to say Constructivism and some successful examples of public life under socialism. For example, the communal courtyards of the '70s: people voluntarily participated in the collective work and because of this the quality of the living environment was much better back then than it is today.

KD: Could architecture change society?

OD: This is one of the tasks of contemporary architecture – to stimulate society's development, especially in Ukraine, where patterns of living are changing so rapidly. Speaking in the context of our practice, we often see examples of change which remind us of the typical formal interview with a sportsman. He's wearing a smart suit and feels quite uneasy because he's used to being sweaty, in shorts, on the sports field. But the presence of this new shell changes him internally and makes him behave quietly and talk smoothly. He is gradually getting used to this new role. I guess that similarly, a 'contemporary architectural shell' could change society by making it more communicative, provoking a totally different type of interaction between its agents.

KD: How do you think the situation of the architect in Ukraine differs from that in Europe?

OD: Regulations are practically non-existent in Ukraine. There are neither institutions nor instruments to manage the development process. There are no zoning regulations and no land register, so that architects take decisions based on their level of training and, let's say, their social ethics. The second main difference is the absence of competition among Ukrainian architects.

KD: It's a paradoxical situation: architects didn't have a market in the 1990s because nobody built and now that everybody's building they still don't have a market.

OD: Yes, because now everybody who's capable of making drawings is overloaded with work. The European situation, where you have to fight for every client, moulds the architect in a totally different way. The third difference, which is very important for the architect's frame of mind, is that 90% of European architects have a fairly balanced mix of commercial and public projects commissioned by non-profit organizations. When a big part of your work is buildings and spaces for public use you start to apply public values to commercial projects too. During our 10-year practice in Ukraine we have had only one genuinely public project – the Jewish Charity Centre in Kharkov, commissioned by the American Charity Fund for Jewish Communities. We are quite prepared to take on such projects, even for a reduced fee, but they just don't exist.

KD: Where should we look for changes and alternatives?

OD: In society itself. And here we have a problem: it's not able to overcome corruption and at the same time people don't want to pay taxes. Everybody lives and works autonomously. Everything is very local. The state is ruled by feudal-style bureaucrats who run their offices the same way as business-

men do, only they are called courts or tax departments. Such are the current tendencies.

KD: It's very common for Ukrainian architects to attribute all their troubles to bad, uncultivated clients. You are probably exceptionally lucky with your clients.

OD: It seems to me that sophisticated businessmen have already realized that by creating an attractive public space you get a much larger flow of visitors. Now even in Ukraine big players in the sector of commercial real estate are interested in creating such spaces. In this sector it's now possible to reach parity between business and public interests. But in a democratic society it should be possible to realize big public spaces that don't have any commercial component.

KD: You work in many Ukrainian cities. How does the situation in Kiev, Kharkov, Odessa and Dnepropetrovsk differ? Is it possible to say that the situation in Kharkov is healthier compared to other cities?

OD: I wouldn't call the situation healthy in any of these cities. In general all the processes, all the institutions concerned with architecture are highly commercialized. Any understanding of the future, any real strategy of city development is absent, as well as any research on which it might be based. Consequently, there can be no positive development without a programme, whatever the quality of design of the individual buildings. Maybe in Dnepropetrovsk the situation is best: you can at least feel some general understanding in the development of the city centre. The uniqueness of Ukraine in the 21st century compared to other European countries lies in the process of concentration, which is particularly acute in Kiev. The whole country now wants to settle in this one city and there is no policy of decentralization, whereas in the rest of Europe development policies aim at a more or less equal distribution of different functions. Such policies are the basis for sustainable development, they bring good ecological dividends and so on. In Ukraine everything is concentrated in one place which leads, first of all, to a collapse of the transport system. Historical cities like Kiev are unable to sustain such pressures on their infrastructure. And there are multiple collisions ahead. I don't think this is a healthy situation, for either natural or 'social' ecology.

KD: So history repeats itself. Kiev is following Moscow's trajectory and nothing can change the course of history?

OD: Yes, that's so. Of course, Moscow always had much stronger professional and intellectual resources than Kiev. But if one looks at where it started from in the 1990s, Kiev was much more attractive than Moscow in terms of natural environment, landscape and geographical location. That's why it's even →



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(Architectural Ambulancer)

more tragic to observe what is happening now. Moscow was radically transformed before the First World War. Kiev has only recently started to crumble.

KD: Returning to Kharkov, it seems to me that the professional situation here is better than in other Ukrainian cities, not only with respect to architectural quality but also because there is a strong architectural community. In 2003 you, along with other local architects, organized a project seminar entitled Architectural Ambulance and in 2004 you initiated a competition for a large housing estate in Kharkov with a high-profile international jury. Is it possible to speak of a Kharkov architecture school?

OD: Architectural Ambulance was indeed a very strong event which deeply influenced all of us. It was held at a time when construction activities in the city were starting to increase, so we wanted to draw the attention of the public and developers

to the uniqueness of Kharkov's city structure and the diversity of its districts, both of which are very important for the further development of the city. We wanted to demonstrate different approaches to the reconstruction and revitalization of these districts. We also wanted international exchange so we invited architects from Russia, Sweden, UK, the Netherlands, Poland and the USA, dividing them into mixed groups – one for each district. But to return to your question, I don't think that a handful of people constitutes a strong community. There is not enough critical mass to talk about a school. Yes, some events take place, but they are still very irregular.

KD: You have been running your own practice for a decade. Have you noticed any changes for better in that time?

OD: Definitely. Ten years ago we started from nothing, society was at zero level at that time. In 1997 we could hardly have imagined the challenges and the opportunities we face today. We started with interior design and now work at an urban scale – there has been a huge evolution in our understanding of architecture during these years. Investors and society give architects more and more opportunities. We are now hopeful of an improvement in housing construction. Housing is the toughest sphere to work in; it's very difficult for me to sell the client the idea of housing as a living environment and not just square metres. The current crisis could pave the way for more human housing in which quantity will take second place to quality.

KD: It was easier for you to realize quality in private housing. Last winter you organized an exhibition of elev-

en private housing projects with the intriguing name of 'Patiology'...

OD: The initial reason for 'Patiology' was to demonstrate more rational and comfortable types of private housing in a situation of growing private land ownership combined with a shortage of land. We accompanied the exhibition with a video debate about the history of the patio in different cultures and the application of the patio in contemporary architecture. It was a good opportunity to meet with friends from other countries to discuss these topics. The exhibition was shown in Kharkov, Dnepropetrovsk, Kiev and Odessa, and nearly six thousand people visited it, mostly young architects and students. We are very enthusiastic about this and are now thinking about organizing more such events.

KD: Is it possible to talk about 'patiology' in your public projects?

OD: The basic typologies we have developed for private houses could be used in public projects as well. In Ukraine, high density living environments prevail and the patio is a perfect instrument for creating liveable spaces in such situations. We should provide high quality private space but at the same time develop public space. Human society is structured this way: it is rooted in the family but is simultaneously interested in public life. So these two categories of private and public spaces should always be present and between them there should be semi-private space framing mini-societies – neighbourhoods and other groups of people. And only the presence of these three types of spaces constitutes normal society.

KD: Recently you got lots of interesting work in Odessa. Drozdov&Partners will soon be associated more with Odessa than with Kharkov...

OD: Not really. We have built several private houses there, but our public projects are only concepts at this time. Odessa is one of the few cities in Ukraine with a strong civic awareness and pro-West European forms of social and commercial life. The historical structure of the city has been perfectly maintained and there are many nice green spaces in the centre. It's very interesting and demanding to work in this city.

KD: There is still uncertainty about whether Odessa should develop as an industrial harbour or as a tourist city.

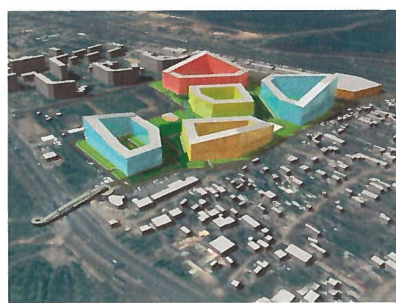
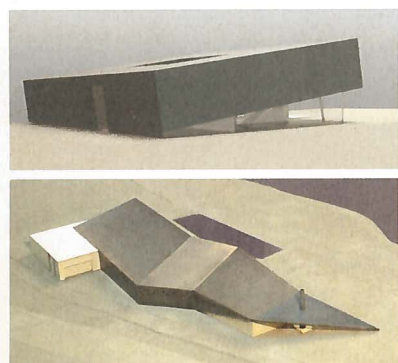
OD: Simple statistical monitoring shows that even the sale of existing industrial areas for recreational projects will yield a higher profit than 20 years of harbour operations. Odessa, in my opinion, has the greatest tourist development potential of any Ukrainian city.

KD: The prospect of Euro 2012 raised a lot of talk in Ukraine about how to turn Kiev into a tourist city...

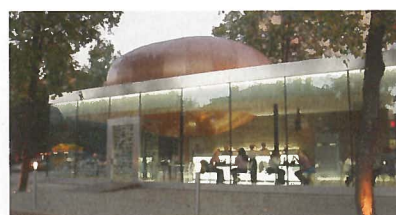
OD: Well, I think it will be very difficult to make Kiev attractive to tourists again. Endless reconstruction and uncontrolled development in the centre has ruined the historical fabric of the city. There are terrible traffic problems in the centre – I can hardly imagine a tourist city more unfriendly to pedestrians than Kiev.

Work by Drozdov&Partners

'PATIOLOGY. TRANSFORMATIONS OF PATIO', EXHIBITION AND CONFERENCE, KHARKOV/ KIEV/ODESSA/DNEPROPETROVSK (2007)
Eleven private houses demonstrate how the patio might be used as a universal instrument for creating private space in areas of dense development. The exhibition was accompanied by a video debate about the history of the patio in different cultures and its role in contemporary architecture. Below: 'Superpatio' (top) and 'Zig zag'.



↑ LUZANOVKA HOUSING DISTRICT, ODESSA (2007–)
The pentagonal structure solves several problems at once: it deflects the cold wind, creates a generous public space around all five blocks, and establishes the kind of shady courtyards that are traditional in Odessa and indispensable in the summer heat. The terraced upper storeys offer beautiful views of the sea and the estuary.



PLATINUM, OFFICE BUILDING, KHARKOV (2004–2007)
The plot provides space for a public courtyard, connected with the high street by a passage. The terraces at the front are designed to host concerts. The underground parking is connected to the neighbouring street by tunnels, reserving the whole of the space adjacent to the high street for pedestrians.



← YASKE SUSHI BAR, KHARKOV (2002–2005)
The two-storey building is located at the intersection of two pedestrian flows and reacts to this with a hinge volume on the second floor. The relaxed boundary between the interior and exterior of the café is very popular with the clientele (see A10 #9).



↑ EXTENSION OF CENTRAL DEPARTMENT STORE, KHARKOV (2007)
The volume of the Central Department Store extension continues the landscape of the existing green slope. It will house a new communication centre, restaurants and retail spaces.

ARBUZ RESTAURANT, KHARKOV (2007–)
Inhaling and exhaling are the key concepts in this project. The entrance (inhales) from the road and the pedestrian alley then opens up (exhales) towards the exuberant green of the central park.



KD: What about Euro 2012? Are there any signs of preparations, of major urban or infrastructure projects?

OD: This is of course our chance to progress to a completely different level of architecture and urban design. We know that such events can lead to the solution of many structural problems, and the dividends don't end with the championship itself. What matters is not only the proper organization of the event, but also a long-term strategy of development which could provide a whole series of further events in the fields of sport, business and culture. But to be honest, I haven't yet heard about any big initiatives in relation to Euro 2012.

KD: Could you say something about your design methodology?

OD: There is general agreement that we should develop a project strategy based not on a morphological analysis but on an understanding of the processes that will be happening there and its interaction with surroundings. Less design, more sociology.

KD: This is very much in the context of the revaluation of architecture which was so noticeable at the last Venice Biennale and this year's Rotterdam Biennale – a shift away from formal experiments towards the role of architecture in society.

OD: We already contribute to a better society. But there are also pragmatic reasons for this, aren't there? Designs that fail to strike a balance between commercial and social interests soon start to deteriorate: they fall empty, they are plastered with ads, people can't wait to get away from them and they gradually become rundown. You need to be very attentive to society's needs if you want your project to enjoy a long and happy life.

KD: Are you doing any sociological research?

OD: Not really. To do real sociological research you need specialists and they are in short supply in Ukraine. There is a Russian saying, 'reckon seven times before you cut'. What we are trying to do is to make this process of looking as lengthy as possible. We always have several versions of the project and only make a choice at the very end, using multiple evaluative criteria.

KD: What are these criteria?

OD: There are lots: contextual, functional, structural... If an architect answers three questions only – he's very bad; if he answers a thousand – he's very good.

KD: 'Patology' was a kind of summary of your first ten years of work. What is ahead?

OD: There is one old dream and it just so happens that it may soon come true. I cannot speak in detail because we are only in the very early stages, but it is a big urban, environmental and high-density project for which we would like to invite other architects from Ukraine and the rest of Europe. We are going to be the master planners in this project and we would like to pay as much attention as possible to lifestyles and to spaces in which individual buildings might interact. ←

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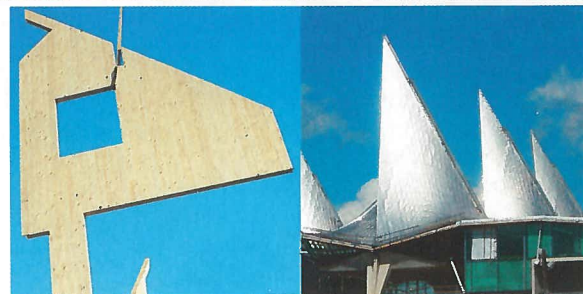
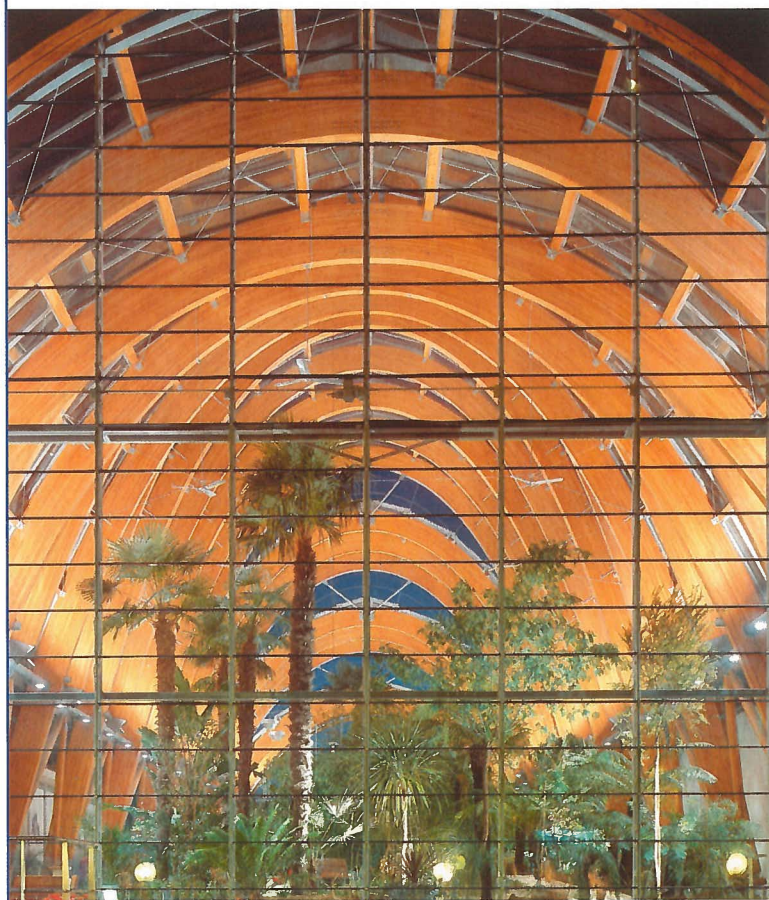
PASSAGE, SHOPPING MALL, KHARKOV (2007–)
The building's structure is determined by the new pedestrian connection, the mall. The different heights of the commercial and business sections is resolved dynamically by a sloping roof. The new construction follows the scale of the quarter which dates from the late 19th century.



NAMISTO, SEA NECKLACE FOR ODESSA (2005)
A major port, a centre of industry and a university city, Odessa also has as-yet unlocked tourism potential. A 'necklace' of seven man-made islands solves some urgent local problems such as the lack of space for new development and inefficient use of the coastal fringe. The project envisages reclaiming 165 hectares of land for high-density, high-tech development. In collaboration with Aleksander Kolesnikov (Nice-Project), Marco Vermeulen and Theo Hauben (Urban Affairs).



STEKLYASHKA, RESTAURANT COMPLEX, KHARKOV (2001–2006)
Divided into several volumes, the building spares as many trees and spaces as possible in the little green square in the city centre. The public life of the square has been changed from a chaotic exterior to an organized interior.



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