

Unknowing through Writing-(and)- Drawing

Wearing away the Rational

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Unknowing is an act of letting prejudices and stereotypes fall from our shoulders. Past knowledge and experience becomes softened and mouldable – prepared to integrate the newly acquired experience as a quick beam of light through the cloud of unknowing.¹ In this article ², unknowing is the human condition in which a person experiences an intense dissolving into the environment. In the condition of unknowing, inner walls of habitual seeing are weakened, and one's immediate awareness grows in receptivity. The intense opening towards the environment leads to an intense dialogue with the place: one learns to walk in a fog of unlearning what was previously known. We could see this as a ritual of sharpening the presence in spatial observation,

which also enhances one's presence in the dialogue with the inhabitants of that place. The condition of unknowing is highly dependent on one's ability to surrender to the inevitable disjunction in a process of learning – the instant of separation and disconnectedness between our 'biography and the perception of our experience' in the present living moment.³ This disjunction is the step back that we need to take in order to reach forward from cumulative or assimilative learning to accommodative or transcendent learning, where a profound growth and self-altering in the learner unfold.⁴ The following reflections exhibit writing and drawing methods that stimulate a creative disjunction from habitual research in architectural and urban thinking through three forms of unknowing: ascending, denying, deconstructing.

Analytical modes of thinking and rational and deductive modes of coming to conclusions have their own meaning and importance. However, emotional and intuitive awareness and imaginative empathy have their own way of revealing meaning embedded in a specific place. In this article, I will reflect on three examples that illustrate how writing and drawing may bring about a different reading of places, architectural typologies and architectural symbols – when filled with fictional stories and speculative narratives:

- 1 Yuri Nornstein's *Hedgehog in the Fog*, a Russian animated movie from 1975,⁵ will be applied as a metaphor for the foggy labyrinth of the creative process. The hedgehog's courage to navigate unknowingly through the dangerous mist resembles a designer's courageous immersion in depths beyond architecture, such as emotional vigilance, the sensitivity to listen and the vivid responsiveness towards the other, the invisible layers of the place and inhabitants, the forces of life from different periods.
- 2 Dostoyevsky's Crystal Palace in his *Notes from the Underground* can be seen as an ironic commentary about an impossible imaginary building, where 'economic relations will be established . . . with mathematical exactitude'⁶ and where all human needs will be predicted, where his

behaviour would be purely rational and oriented only towards his own logical wellbeing. The Crystal Palace here is 'a symbol of the controlling mechanism of utilitarian rationalism', offering material abundance at the cost of 'spirit, autonomy and authenticity'.⁷

- 3 Brodsky and Utkin's project of the Crystal Palace is presented as a 'mirage at the edge of the visible' at the end of a decaying urban borderline, named 'Dump'. Here, the Palace itself is without a roof or walls, but it has a sequence of parallel glass plates instead. After passing through the Dump, the visitor walks through the Palace and arrives at a terrace – the edge between the natural landscape and the city.

The Fog: Messenger of Uncertainty

A visual analogy of unknowing is Yuri Nornstein's *Hedgehog in the Fog* (1975). While having his usual walk in the forest, the hedgehog observes each natural entity that appears to him with wonder and appreciation. When entering into the shrubs, his vision becomes blurry and he starts longing for his evening ritual of drinking tea and counting stars with his friend, the bear. He is imagining what they will talk about and how he will offer the bear the raspberry jam he has with him. He emerges from the shrubs and starts to walk uphill. All of a sudden, an immense field of fog appears in front of him, and a beautiful semi-visible white horse appears in the middle of the white cloud. His flow of thoughts is broken by amazement. The beauty of the horse and his concern – 'if the horse lies down to sleep, will it choke in the fog?' – draws him to make his way into the fog. The hedgehog becomes mesmerized by the constantly changing world inside the fog. Separating himself from the visibility of the shrubs, he starts his gentle walk through the fog. Wandering around, he takes a fallen branch and tries to reach something touchable in the middle of that dense air. Finally, he succeeds in encountering a touchable entity, which appears to be a sumptuous tree rising towards the sky. But in this moment of aesthetic epiphany, a leaf falls and he hears the voice of his friend searching for him. Suddenly, he realizes he has lost his gift for the bear; he starts moving chaotically and in panic.

Helpless and lost, the hedgehog closes his eyes, surrendering his will to the fog. All of a sudden, a dog approaches, bringing the gift back to him. A moment later, he falls into the river, speaking the words: 'Let the water carry me along.' Floating calmly on the water, the face of the horse and the stars appear and disappear above his eyes, while a voice of someone below the river's surface offers him a ride back to the shore. In the next scene, he is reunited with his friend, the bear, in a warm familiar atmosphere. But his eyes reflect the burden of what they have seen in that excursion through the fog, and he speaks the closing sentence: 'How is she . . . out there in the fog?'

The fog is the unknown field in the life of each of us. It is there, an uncertain area in a constant change, hiding untouched places of possible immersion. Most of the time, we are too busy to look at it. We approach it only when there is a danger that a dear person may drown inside of it, when we are forced to go. But why not earlier? Why do we always see only the danger that may attack our comfortable state of being, instead of observing the unknown, the richness of being carried along by the river? Here, the horse is a metaphor of beauty, love or truth; it encourages the hedgehog to climb towards something, while actually being immersed into a misty landscape that demands a specific sensitivity of walking its ground. The walk is stimulated by ascending towards the horse, but the richness of the route is exposed through the unexpected encounters of the hedgehog with other beings that dwell inside the mist. The gift – the physical reminder of the familiar world, and the voice of the bear – are meaningful forces that take the hedgehog back to the familiar world. But the return is not the same – it is defamiliarized: the hedgehog is now dwelling in and between the two worlds, on and above the ground.

The cinematic technique in Nornstein's movie-making is the following: 'a two-dimensional flat-art is shot on multiple glass plane', which leads to a 'painstaking frame by frame process' that refuses the speed and the short-cuts offered by digital tools.⁸ The flat characters that are cut from a material

dance together while co-creating the narrative. Each piece is handcrafted, bringing a prolongation of the creational experience for the author, an authentic cinematic 'handwriting'. Nornstein's meticulous immersion in each scene earned him the name 'the golden snail'.⁹ However, the silent dialogue between the animated characters (the Hedgehog, the Bear, the Owl, Someone, and the Dog) and the environmental setting (the forest, the yard in front of the house, the fog, the tree, the flying leaves) cannot be read by reading 'what is described in details'; on the contrary, 'one should look to that which is implied, but not explicitly written'.¹⁰ The unknown, which becomes intuitively understandable but never describable for the audience, oddly familiar to his embodied memory and warmly strange to his reflective mind at the same time, is that 'break in the text . . . the most alive place in cinema'.¹¹

Dostoyevsky's Via Negativa¹²

Dostoyevsky's *Notes from the Underground*, written 1864, is a critical response to the utopianism and utilitarianism that prevailed in Russia in the 'revolutionary' modes of thinking of that period.¹³ The main protagonist – a retired civil servant – is a person detached from relations with people. Written in the form of a monologue, his 'letters' are a harsh attack on the formula '2+2=4' and against the belief that the destructive dark sides of man's psyche may simply disappear if a perfect social and economic order built upon a rational system is constructed. He is actually an anti-hero, testing the limits of the human free will by exhibiting the importance of the irrational human nature.

In this work, the Crystal Palace is a symbolic image of the ideal of Chernyshevsky's Utopian society in *What Is to Be Done* (1863), which was built upon enlightened self-interest and rational egoism. Dostoyevsky visited Paxton's Crystal Palace in London in 1862 – his reflections are recorded in his *Winter Notes on Summer Impressions*. Naming London as Baal, he writes that the Crystal Palace was a 'terrible force that has united all the people here, who came from all over the world in a single herd',¹⁴ as well as the 'proud and

dismal spirit of materialism'.¹⁵ By most, the Palace itself was considered to be a technological miracle because it was the first structure that had such a large surface of glass. Built with products from different countries, it was a symbol of internationalism, but also of the superiority of British manufacturers.

Contrary to the general understanding that Dostoyevsky's *Winter Notes* are a critique of rationalism, I read in these notes a critique on the 'loss of sensibility, systematic, resigned and encouraged'.¹⁶ Dostoyevsky speaks of the Saturday nights in the town, when all the people, 'men and women and their children spread like the ocean over the town', spending everything they had earned through hard work during the week, rushing to drink themselves into 'insensibility', escaping reality.¹⁷ This observation of the citizens is explicated right after his impression of the Crystal Palace, 'the feeling that something has been achieved, triumph and victory that makes him feel "nervous" and "breathless"'.¹⁸ He poses the question that reverberates later in his *Notes from the Underground*: 'Can this, you think, be the final accomplishment of the ideal state of things?'¹⁹ Rather than answering, he continues by describing his encounter with the movement of the crowd on the urban streets and the citizen's drive towards 'insensibility' as a mode of numbing the senses and of avoidance of questioning the 'rightness of the existing order'.²⁰

Dostoyevsky's denying as unknowing is contained in the way his narrators (the underground man and himself on the trip) shift from protagonists to antagonists and vice versa, while rarely explicitly giving a final statement. For example, in *Winter Notes on Summer Impressions* the narrator poses a rhetorical question that summarizes his discussions on the contrast between the Crystal Palace and ordinary citizen's life in London, 20 pages later: 'How can there possibly be any brotherhood if it is preceded by a distribution of shares and by determining how much each person has earned and what each must do?'²¹

The flow of the writing is not progressive and it is difficult for the reader to grasp the true opinion of the writer. However, while stalking the writer's thoughts, one starts to search for one's own voice; the ground seems to be loosened by the narrator's disturbing questions and arhythmical digressions. The internal dialogue of the writer awakens the internal dialogue of the reader: walking in the unknown. In the novel, Dostoyevsky imagines that once the Crystal Palace is built, 'halcyon days' will arrive, and everything will be 'extraordinarily rational'.²² But he immediately puts forward the fact that people do not always behave as their reason and advantage dictates: 'What has made them conceive that man must want a rationally advantageous choice?'²³ Then, he comes to the statement that all that a human being wants is an independent choice, even if it is a caprice. But that would not be possible in the Crystal Palace, because choice leads to uncertainty, anxiety and suffering: 'Suffering means doubt and negation . . . the sole origin of consciences . . . and what would be the good of the palace of crystal if there could be any doubt about it?'²⁴

Dostoyevsky violates the progress-oriented optimistic narrative of the Crystal Palace by exhibiting its weaknesses to the dystopian extremes. The human tendency towards destruction and chaos is his main argument and point of departure. Although the main protagonist appears as a nihilist without any tendency or aspiration other than harsh criticism, he does break and shatter the knowing utopian ascending towards utilitarian materialism and glorification of the rational power of the human mind.

Finally, Dostoyevsky's use of the image of the Crystal Palace as 'something to do with Babylon',²⁵ generated its counterpart as an architectural metaphor: the underground. The underground holds the unprocessed layers of mud that settle in the soul of the citizen who avoids the questioning of (fragments of) reality.

Brodsky and Utkin's Spatial Deconstruction of the Crystal Palace as a Strong Monument of Progress

*Seaweed swarms with
Transparent [minnows] Catch them –
They shall thaw without a trace²⁶*

This quotation of a haiku by Matsuo Bashō occupies the central space of Brodsky and Utkin's etching *The Crystal Palace*, an etching that includes plans, sections, elevation, closeups and a written story about the Crystal Palace. The project was a design submitted for the Central Glass Co. Competition in 1982. Both the authors - Ilya Utkin and Alexander Brodsky - were associated with the *paper architects* who interpreted fragments of already written poetry into design solutions containing a poetic narrative – both written and drawn.

The drawings represent the Crystal Palace from different perspectives. The first drawing (upper left) is an elevation of the entrance. Here, one can notice that the floor is elevated from the ground and the roof is a complex vivid curve that cannot be understood without the assistance of the surrounding drawings. The axonometry below Bashō's haiku, on the other hand, shows that the Palace is without a roof and that it consists of vertical plates of glass, set a few metres apart; the finishing line of each plate is a different curve that avoids symmetry. The plan on the left shows the wider location of the Palace: the straight ceremonial road to it departs from fragmented neighbourhoods at the edge of the town, and then it cuts through some quarters marked with the word 'Dump'. The road is elongated over the elevated platform, transforming into a long narrow staircase. The widening of the surface takes place at the elevated square, which is surrounded by a confusing and undefined landscape that appears to be flowing and trembling. The upper drawing in the middle represents the view of the Palace from a distance – from the town borderland marked with an urban

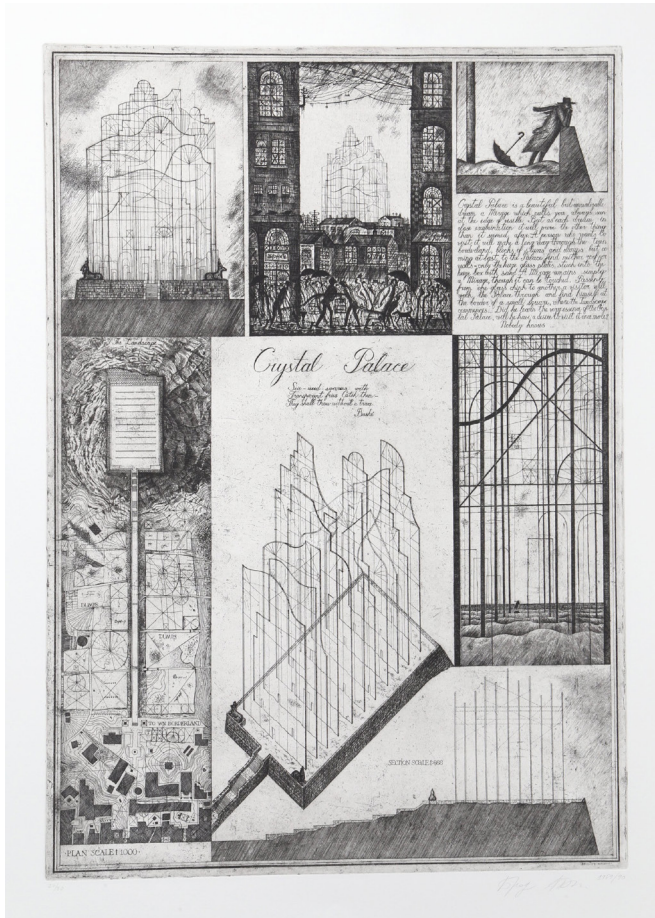


Fig.1. *The Crystal Palace*, Brodsky and Utkin, etching, projects 1981-1990. Available online at: domusweb.it/en/architecture/2012/03/21/paper-tigers.html

door. Finally, the drawing on the right side represents the human figure in relation to 1) the small terrace with a fence at the end of the road, and 2) the perspective view through the many pieces of glass with a wavy ground.

In between these two drawings, the authors included a short story in which they introduce the Palace as a 'beautiful but unrealizable dream, a Mirage', which when closely examined becomes something different than before. One can also conclude from the written words that the glass plates are inserted into a 'huge box of sand' that, when compared with the elevation with the human figure inside of it, is reminiscent of the scene of Tarkovsky's *Stalker* (1979), when the Writer enters the abandoned tall basilica without a roof or a clear function. Another thing in the text that cannot be read from the visuals is whether or not the visitor learned the essence of the Crystal Palace and if he will 'have a desire to visit it once more'.

Different Readings of the Crystal Palace

I was not able to discover for sure if this Palace has any direct relation to Dostoyevsky's or Paxton's manifestation of it. However, we can distinguish a few differences between two of the versions – that of Paxton and that of Brodsky and Utkin. First, in terms of the movement of the visitor, a distinction can be made between the different positions in relation to the glass: under/in the glass versus through/around the glass. In Paxton's Crystal Palace, the movement unfolds symmetrically through the naves of a porous basilica, filled with precise function. The glass plates are the shell of the whole. In Brodsky and Utkin's version, the movement is through or around the elements of glass, not via a straight line but through unknown (undrawn) openings in the plates, which (possibly) makes the elevated square a silent labyrinth. The section is not symmetrical because each glass plate has its own curvilinear dialogue with the sky. There is no defined content.

Second, on the level of the dialogue with the exterior, Paxton's Palace seems to be closed, strong, and protective, while Brodsky's Palace is open and vulnerable. For Paxton, the form follows the idea of the object to be a large hall which should be wide enough to house and strong enough to protect the products that arrived from different countries, while for Brodsky and Utkin, the form is opposite to something strong and protective. The roof is absent, while the glass plates are not even considered as walls in the text. What the structure houses and what it protects remains an open question.

Finally, we can see both versions of the Crystal Palace as a spatial metaphor: the one of promise of technological progress versus the mirage of modernization. Paxton's Palace is a realized (and yet deconstructed) symbol of technological progress, a promise for material wellbeing and international connecting, bringing together many people from different parts of the world and from different sociological backgrounds. Brodsky and Utkin's Palace is instead an 'unrealizable dream' from the very beginning, a promise of a strange mode of arrival. The human figure drawn in the visuals seems lonely, confused and lost. The Palace is seen as a mirage; etchings represent a silent bold resistance towards the emerging shiny state-sanctioned architecture in Moscow that did not have any sensitivity towards the cultural heritage, which was falling apart.²⁷ Naming the Palace a mirage, melancholically and sceptically, reflects the authors' own doubt and critical attitude towards what was seen as progress and modernization, because they both grew up in post-war Moscow, where 'mirage is only a mirage remains simply a mirage, though it can be touched'.²⁸

Brodsky waited for 20 years to be able to build things. Similar to Dostoyevsky's protagonist, he was examining his spatial imagination in the 'underground'. But unlike the antihero-ness in the criticism in Dostoyevsky's *Notes from the Underground*, Brodsky chose to draw what he could not build with a critique that was not so radical that it suffocated the hope that architecture can make the world a better place, despite the inherent scept-

ticism in the drawings. He speaks about the act of drawing as a mythical and mysterious process of unexpected revelations that makes him 'see something new which I didn't intend to make'.²⁹ As a complaint against computer drawing – something that makes him feel 'depressed' and 'afraid' of being controlled – he refers to hand drawing as something that is 'absolutely free and unpredictable'.³⁰ This spontaneity of the act of hand drawing 'is like making a door which makes it possible to go inside' what you create more deeply.³¹

The ascending as unknowing here happens as a walking of the visitor from the edge of the town border, through the Dump as a remnant from a fallen and forgotten meaning, to the Crystal Palace's platform, which appears to be a territory divided between 11 glass plates that ascend towards the sky with a different curvilinear finishing. The stereotype of the Crystal Palace as something that protects products and brings together people and material goods, is turned into precisely the opposite here – a roofless and wall-less park with transparent panels, protecting only the visitor's freedom to find meaning beyond architecture, at the very edge of the city. This meaning-finding is such a fragile thing, just like the transparent minnows in Bashō's poem, slipping from your palm in the very next moment after you've succeeded to hold them.

The etching technique that created this drawing was a technique very often used in Russia in that period (1978-1993) for illustrating books and literature.³² Just as Nornstein's handicrafts, etching in architecture is a painstaking process similar to an alchemical ritual: metal, acid, bird feather, methylated spirits, ink, paper interact directly with the hands of the two architects. It leads to an immersion and devotion that multiplies the project-related questions that spring up during the creative process; it multiplies the layers of spatial meaning that the authors wish to convey. Most importantly, it multiplies the *interiorization* of one's architectural imagination in the transformation of the inner world, leaving a room for

the unknown and the unspoken, beyond explicit descriptions for external reality: '... a house with an atrium is like a reserved man wholly plunged into the endless space of his inner world.'³³

Unknowning as an Attitude towards the Research of Place

The three forms of unknowing – ascending, denying and deconstructing – place the reader in the same condition as the researcher who approaches an architectural or an urban entity phenomenologically: with a radically enhanced spatial sensitivity and imaginative awareness, the researcher becomes a kind of inhabitant. Never belonging completely to either the researcher role or to the inhabitant role, (s)he stops 'acting' what is expected to be acted out and begins to operate authentically between these two fields of spatial experience.

Denying – the apophatic way of strategic negation – is a modality of spatial thinking that circumscribes what should not be done, rather than pointing out what should be done. Dostoyevsky's description of the dystopian notion of the Crystal Palace works similarly in novels from the science fiction genre: creating an imaginary place that exhibits the faults of the contemporary crisis of the spirit, it is a critique and denial of the then-popular belief in the greatness of material progress. It is perhaps because of this explicit storytelling denial and vivid hypothetical architectural metaphoric grasping of the progress-oriented ideals of that time, that this is Dostoyevsky's most known and elaborated work in the Western world.

Deconstructing the generally accepted definition of a palace as a strong monument of progress is Brodsky's and Utkin's way of operating as architects in a time-place that did not allow their critical thinking to be materialized. Their etching of the Crystal Palace represents the designing of something opposite to the expected image of a palace: the symbolic design principles are inverted. The entwinement of the poetic prose writing and the cinematic narrative drawing works as a 'method' in the following ways:

first, it polemicalizes what a palace, a dump, a gate and a city mean to the contemporary (wo)man, widening the connotations of these words through design as a creative critique of reality. Second, it unfolds the story through the eyes of the visitor. And third, the flow, order and rhythm of (re)reading is completely dependent on the will of the Reader.

The three modes of unknowing contain writing modalities of spatial thinking that transform spatial elements into metaphors beyond the physical, the visible or the useful. These writing modalities offer ways to make architecture aware of the wider processes unfolding in the world, from an existential, anthropological and intersubjective perspective that encourages the 'seeing of the invisible'.

- 1 William Johnston (ed.), *The Cloud of Unknowing and the Book of Privy Counseling* (New York: Image | Double Day | Random House, 2012).
- 2 The writing is a processual trace and fragment of the author's PhD in progress, entitled *Emotive Immersion Through Poem-Drawing in Spatial Design* (University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Architecture).
- 3 Peter Jarvis, 'Learning To Be A Person in Society, Learning To Be Me', in: Knud Illeris (ed.), *Contemporary Theories of Learning: Learning Theorists . . . In Their Own Words* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 22.
- 4 Knud Illeris, 'A Comprehensive Understanding of Human Learning', in: *ibid.*, 13.
- 5 Yuri Nornstein (dir.), *Hedgehog in the Fog* (Moscow, 1975).
- 6 Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Notes from the Underground* (1984), 33. Available online at: planetebook.com/free-ebooks/notes-from-the-underground.pdf.

- 7 Roger Chapman, 'Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Eastern Orthodoxy and the Crystal Palace', in: Anne R. Richards and Iraj Omidvar (eds.), *Historic Engagements with Occidental Cultures, Religions, Powers: Postcolonialism and Religions* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 35.
- 8 The Golden Snail: An Evening with Yuri Norstein (invitation). Friday, January 29, 2010 - 7:00pm. Film Studies Center. See: filmstudiescenter.uchicago.edu/events/2010/golden-snail-evening-yuri-norstein#:~:text=Norstein%20uses%20a%20technique%20in,in%20Norstein's%20films%20is%20handcrafted (accessed February 2021).
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Elena Skulskaya, Юрий Норштейн. На Тихусяя ницего похож, Дело, 23 June 2003. See: idelo.ru/282/26.html (accessed February 2021).
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Negative way, or way of denial.
- 13 Dostoyevsky, *Notes from the Underground*, op. cit. (note 6).
- 14 Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Winter Notes on Summer Impressions* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1997), 37.
- 15 Ibid., 42.
- 16 Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Winter Notes on Summer Impressions* (London: Alma Books, 2008 [1862]), 52.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Ibid., 50.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Ibid., 51.
- 21 Ibid., 71.
- 22 Dostoyevsky, *Notes from the Underground*, op. cit. (note 6), 33.
- 23 Ibid., 34.
- 24 Ibid., 45.
- 25 Dostoyevsky, *Winter Notes 1862 | 2008*, op. cit. (note 16), 50.
- 26 Cited in Brodsky and Utkin's *The Crystal Pallace*, etching, projects 1981-1990. Available online at: domusweb.it/en/architecture/2012/03/21/paper-tigers.html.
- 27 In an interview with Igor Zinatulin, in 2013, Brodsky explained that due to the corruption, only 'those with most troubles' were the ones who were allowed to build in the city; hence, money was 'being poured into erecting shiny office blocks while historic buildings lie neglected'. 'Grand Designs: What's Inside the Mind of Alexander Brodsky, Russia's Greatest Architect? An Interview', *The Calvert Journal* (2013). Available online at: calvertjournal.com/articles/show/1/alexander-brodsky-russia-greatest-living-architect (accessed January 2020).

- 28 A sentence from the story written in the etching.
- 29 Ingerid Almaas and Einar Bjarki Malmquist, 'The Reality of a Drawing: An Interview with Alexander Brodsky', *Arhitektur N magazine* (2008). Available online at: architecturenorway.no/questions/histories/The_reality_of_a_drawing_an_interview_with_Alexander_Brodsky/ (accessed March 2020).
- 30 Ibid.
- 31 bid.
- 32 Andrzej Bialkiewich, *Play with Architecture in Technical Transactions*, (Krakow: University of Technology, 2015) 8-A, 20
- 33 Brian Hatton, 'Alexander Brodski: A Carnival of Long Moments', in: Alexander Brodsky – Works (Berlin: Museum for Architectural Drawing, 2015), 28