

UP FRONT: VLADIMIR RADUTNY

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ZURICH ESPOSITO TALKS WITH THE 2016 DUBIN FAMILY YOUNG ARCHITECT AWARD WINNER, VLADIMIR RADUTNY, AIA.

Vladimir Radutny, AIA, is the recipient of the 2016 Dubin Family Young Architect award, an honor bestowed by the AIA Chicago Foundation. Vlad, 38, is the principal of Vladimir Radutny Architects, an emerging firm whose work has received nine design awards from AIA Chicago. He is also a part-time professor at IIT's College of Architecture. AIA Chicago's Zurich Esposito met with Vlad at his firm's River North studio to discuss his journey to the front of the pack of outstanding young Chicago architects.

Zurich Esposito: When you were 11, your family moved to the United States from the former Soviet Union as Russian-Jewish refugees. What was the transition like?

Vladimir Radutny: Moving to the U.S. was interesting, almost fun, leaving a world that was enclosed and isolated. We settled in West Rogers Park. Culturally, I was interested in American activities, including baseball and learning English — mostly through watching sports. I had Russian friends, but I was interested in getting out of that bubble. I was attracted to the arts, while many of the immigrant children I grew up around pursued more science-driven interests. In my senior year at Ida Crown Jewish

Academy, I was asked to do a drawing for the yearbook. I drew a floorplan of the school. I didn't know at the time that this is what architects do.

ZE: What influenced your decision to pursue a degree in architecture?

VR: Going to school and having a steady career was the main goal. But my parents had not been in the U.S. very long, and were working — sometimes multiple jobs — and didn't really know how to advise me. We talked about a lot of professions, but architecture was never part of the conversation. Around the end of my junior year of high school, a friend and I went to the library and opened up a book of occupations and their descriptions and stopped at "A." Arts and science and math were listed as components of being an architect, and I was looking for a profession that incorporated arts. Because of that book, architecture was the direction I went, and so did my friend.

ZE: What impact has mentorship had on your training and career?

VR: On an academic level, mentorship had a huge impact on how I think about and see architecture and space. Trisha Stuth, my second-year TA at

UW-Milwaukee, where I went before transferring to University of Illinois, was instrumental in opening up my eyes and actually showing me what architecture is.

I transferred to the University of Illinois primarily for their Versailles program [Radutny holds a bachelor's and master's degree from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign]. My professors were incredible; the director of the program, Alejandro Lapunzina, was regarded as an architecture guru. I wanted to see architecture the way he was teaching it. He introduced me to the work of a set of architects that expanded my understanding. Later, after other positions in London and Chicago, I worked at Krueck + Sexton, where mentorship on a professional level really came to life. I learned a lot from the principals. Though I left the firm in 2008 to start a firm, Mark Sexton and I keep a close relationship. I can go to Mark and ask questions — not just about architecture, but business-related questions as well.

ZE: Was it important for you to become licensed soon after finishing architecture school?

VR: Yes, very important. A milestone as important as getting the degree, and you're not an architect unless you have a license.

ZE: You established a firm in 2008 — a very challenging time. How difficult was it to survive and grow over these years?

VR: My [then] partner Paul Tebben and I worked our asses off and did everything we could to survive. We got commissions through relationships and from friends or from random emails asking us to do random projects. A project to renovate an apartment at 880 North Lake Shore Drive that my wife

and I purchased made a difference. I general-contracted and physically built most of the elements. That apartment project actually yielded quite a bit of new work. In 2010, we started adding staff. Now the firm is a group of five.

ZE: What kind of projects does your firm specialize in?

VR: We've become known for doing renovation work — single-family, multi-family, light institutional or religious — taking the existing space and transforming it. We are now working on our first ground-up building and the largest scale project we've done — an 8-unit residential project in Ukrainian Village.

ZE: You and your wife have three children, you teach, and you lead a relevant design practice. How difficult is that to balance?

VR: It's a big challenge to control. I like to give 120 percent to everything. I'm fortunate to have an incredibly supportive wife and a really dedicated staff. The architecture we're interested in is extremely time-consuming so that time usually gets borrowed from family time.

ZE: You've been described by your clients as "scrupulously honest." What compels them to describe you that way?

VR: In the culture I come from, people tend to be extremely straightforward. I try to explain things as they are. Architecturally, there's a poetic element to how you see things, but at times you have to just tell it how it is. **CA**

The Chicago Design Museum presented a talk by Vladimir Radutny, AIA, on January 11. For more information, visit www.aiachicago.org/events.