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## Elena Baturina: Open to Ideas

BY JOSH SIMS

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*Russian magnate Elena Baturina has launched Be Open, a think-tank and innovation promoter, that could become an intellectual powerhouse in the world of international design.*



It is a hard and strange label to carry around: Russia's richest woman. Elena Baturina, London and Austria-based magnate, recently had her net worth valued at \$1.1 billion. Prior to the financial crisis it was closer to \$4.2 billion. But after a few hundred million you stop counting anyway. Indeed, you turn to other interests: design, in Baturina's case.

It is somehow an unlikely choice. Baturina is, on first meeting at least, a formal and formally dressed big desk, to-the-point business type. She talks of her job now as being to inspire her team, "so I'm always putting very challenging tasks to them", she says. "The first response is always that it's impossible. But we always manage to achieve it anyway. I think the only way to make a team come alive is to set very high aims."

She owns hotels and ski resorts and wants to buy more. She made her money in construction, cement and real estate, selling her Inteco business last year. She is the wife of Yuri Luzhkov, mayor of Moscow until 2010, when he was sacked amid possibly politically motivated accusations of corruption. She has been at the pointy end of politics too, and notes a concern "that there are no clear rules and regulations in Russia for business to develop. You can follow the rules and somehow still find later that they don't apply to you". It is all a long way from the arty/wacky/madcap/creative (delete as applicable) world of design.

But that may be set to change. Indeed, Baturina may well become one of the design world's major players. She has used some of her fortune — and put some \$100 million in the pot — to launch Be Open, a global think-tank and innovation promoter. It aims to bring together the brainpower of heavyweight creatives — Norman Foster and Julian Schnabel among them — through conferences, arts events, classes, mentorship schemes, awards and the good old-fashioned writing of cheques, mostly for people under 30 with bright ideas they don't know what to do with, who need tuition or cash for prototyping. Among the projects it has looked at so far are sound pollution in London and off-the-grid energy generation in Milan. This year alone it has run projects at Design Miami/Basel, 100% Design and International Milan Design Week. It has, in short, gone in all guns blazing.

"There are plenty of good ideas out there but it's hard for them to reach masses of people," Baturina, 49, a factory worker turned entrepreneur, explains. "We live in a very materialistic society and often don't pay attention to things that don't bring immediate rewards. Lots of really innovative ideas just get put in a drawer. And for me one of the most valuable or precious things [of my position] is the opportunity to address the right people, those unorthodox thinkers, people who enrich the world, the ones who are most likely to inform our futures, who show us new ways to apply knowledge."



Funded by Russian magnate Elena Baturina, Be Open aims to harness the brainpower of leading established creatives to support and develop young design talents globally.

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"Each person needs to decide what sort of philanthropy works best for them. What's more important is that people are encouraged towards philanthropy," says Elena Baturina, founder, Be Open.