

The pursuit of happiness

By Georgina Adam

Elena Baturina is the creator of a design think-tank devoted to improving the world



Open: Elena Baturina in London

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Elena Baturina is generally dubbed “Russia’s richest woman”. Her fortune, acquired through extensive construction and cement interests, was estimated at \$1.2bn by Forbes this year. She was much richer before the financial crisis: in 2008, Forbes reported that she was worth \$4.2bn. Baturina’s husband, Yuri Luzhkov, was mayor of Moscow from 1992 to 2010, when he was sacked amid accusations of corruption: he says these are politically motivated.

Baturina is currently based in London, and from there she has launched a new project, a “creative think-tank” dubbed Be Open. Its aims are noble: to encourage creativity and innovation among young designers and artists and to build bridges between Russia and

the rest of the world. Its website claims that she is investing \$100m in intellectual development: “to identify solutions to major social issues and develop them from concept stage to realisation”.



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Be Open’s first project was a conference in Milan last week, held during the annual Salone del Mobile and entitled “Design: Language of the Future”, with discussions about subjects such as sustainability in design and “happiness”, featuring the US artist Julian Schnabel. Alongside this was *Verve*, an exhibition of art showcasing young Russian artists. The third facet of the project is an award scheme for young designers, open to all.

Baturina left Russia in 2010 with their two daughters after her husband was sacked: at the time he cited fears for his family as the reason for their departure. Earlier this year Luzhkov was questioned as a witness over a Bank of Moscow case involving a fraudulent loan of almost Rbs 13bn (\$415m). Baturina has been called as a witness in the case, but has said that she fears not being allowed to leave Russia again if she returns.

I meet Baturina in the chic Baglioni boutique hotel just opposite Kensington Palace and we immediately start talking about whether design can change the world. I am rather startled when Baturina, an expensive-looking white watch twinkling on her wrist, launches into a denunciation of the consumer society.

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Her idea is to stimulate innovation and “good design”, and so contribute to a better world: “I am convinced that human ideas and thoughts are often influenced by the visual. If people are shown horrible things then they become aggressive and horrible themselves. But beauty, on the other hand, brings a peaceful society.” While admitting that a “design Utopia” is not possible, she says she hopes her project will enable “the next generation to live in a beautiful, kind world”.

Asked if she has been planning this project for long, she says that she has always been involved in design, through Inteco, her plastic-products company [now sold], which made furniture and crockery.

“I was always thinking of different forms for things, but this scheme really took shape about 18 months ago,” she says. Her plan is to roll out a series of conferences during the main design events in London, New York and eventually the Middle East. More exhibitions focusing on Russian contemporary art and design will be organised as the programme goes on.

“The problem of Russian contemporary art is that it’s separated from the rest of the world, I don’t know if this is a historic inheritance, but it is not well enough integrated into world art. The whole world knows the names of famous galleries but not those of Russian contemporary artists. They don’t have a showcase, and the situation is even worse for young designers,” Baturina says.

As for the awards, these are designed to recompense original design solutions, and the use of future technologies that can be implemented today. “There are three prizes,” Baturina explains: “Each winner gets tuition fees in a top design institute, and the first gets €10,000 to make a prototype of their project.”

This reminds me of the Ukrainian steel-pipe billionaire, Victor Pinchuk, who has been ploughing some of his fortune into philanthropy and art – a project that some suggest was triggered by bad headlines over his business dealings in the early 2000s.

I mention his support of young Ukrainian artists to Baturina, asking if she is working to a similar model: to my surprise, she appears not to have heard of his scheme, and thanks me for telling her about it. This is perhaps because Baturina is not a collector in the contemporary field: her tastes are for 19th-century porcelain and Russian art, particularly the work of the landscape painter Alexei Savrasov.

She says she will spend as much as needed on Be Open. It is, she says: “An investment on researching great ideas and creating the infrastructure to realise them.”

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