Completed by United Construction and Engineering in 2016

ART & DESIGN

Daniel and Estrellita Brodsky Dreamed of a Modern Home in a Pastoral Setting

That's when architect Tom Kundig stepped in

By Sarah Medford
Dec. 11, 2018 10:33 a.m. ET

DANIEL BRODSKY'S family business, the Brodsky Organization, is a prolific developer of rental housing and condominiums in New York City. His love for the gritty particulars of building things and for architecture—especially the grand vision of Swiss-French visionary Le Corbusier—has seeped into his private life over the years. Recently he and his wife, Estrellita Brodsky, decided to take on a personal project upstate, and that's where their interests, as often happens, diverged.

"I'd rather be on a construction site than in my office," Dan, 74, says, assembling a tuna salad for lunch at the kitchen counter of their new weekend house. Estrellita, 67, laying out the plates, was less preoccupied with architectural plans and more engaged by "the romantic idea of going back to the land, of making it more sustainable," she says. An art historian and a collector of Latin American art, she also imagined an Arcadian setting for some of her paintings—"which has been hard," she adds hesitantly, "given the amount of glass here."

The job of reconciling the Brodskys' contrasting narratives fell to Tom Kundig, a Seattle-based architect known for brooding, sensuous modern houses often in remote places. The site they'd chosen was a former dairy farm on 160 acres of pastureland in Millerton, a rural village two hours north of Manhattan by car. "Dan and Esty wanted a quiet architecture," Kundig says by phone from his office near the Seattle docks. "It's intended to be a peaceful, quiet building in the landscape. Then inside, it's a big yin and yang. There's a story there."

Few who know Kundig's work would describe what he does as quiet. His best-known dwelling, on one of the lower San Juan Islands of Washington State, is a concrete pavilion wedged into a

CONCRETE DREAMS Dan and Estrellita Brodsky on a walkway to the guesthouse, where their children often stay with their families **PHOTO:** FRANÇOIS COQUEREL FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

stony outcropping and cheekily dubbed The Pierre by its owner, arts patron Merrill Wright. Kundig's own Seattle dwelling, where he and his wife, Jeannie, have lived since 2006, is nicknamed Hot Rod House because it essentially explodes a circa-1900 bungalow from within and reassembles it with luxury parts, the centerpiece being an Escher-like folded-steel staircase that ascends three stories—part sculpture, part structural ballast.

Kundig, 64, is internationally celebrated for his residential projects, which have taken shape as far afield as Spain, Hawaii and Rio de Janeiro. In his role as a principal and co-owner at Olson Kundig, the 175-person Seattle firm he joined as an associate in 1986, he has also designed rigorous commercial and cultural buildings. There have been museums, restaurants, office towers and resorts, and more of each are on the drawing board; this past June, Kundig was given the nod as the lead architect of the Bob Dylan Center, an extension of the Bob Dylan Archive in Tulsa, Oklahoma, opening in 2021.

Kundig's parents were Swiss émigrés who settled in Merced, Washington, and later in Spokane, and as a child he spent a great deal of time in nature with his architect father. But it was his later pursuit of hiking, skiing and alpine climbing that shaped his view of himself and the

natural order. In a 2011 book, he noted that growing up in the Palouse region of the Pacific Northwest taught him “how insignificant your place in that larger landscape is. To this day, I think that influences virtually every decision I make about architecture in its context.”

Tall and slender, with the shaggy haircut of a heavy-metal guitarist, Kundig passes up the Prada suits and attention-getting eyewear of big-league architects in favor of dungarees, plaid shirts, wire-rimmed glasses and, when the situation demands, a navy blazer. He has “absolutely not a hint of arrogance,” says entrepreneur Anthony von Mandl, who has worked with Kundig on four wineries and two houses over 22 years. When asked how the Brodskys found him back in 2013, the architect shrugs. “It’s the usual deal,” he says. “A lot of vectors.”

One vector was social, friends of the Brodskys in Sun Valley, Idaho, and Seattle, where Kundig has designed daring, emotionally resonant houses for artists and writers and some of the country’s foremost collectors of modern and contemporary art. Jim Olson, the founding partner of Kundig’s firm and himself a regular on the art-world shortlist of go-to architects, says that his colleague tends to attract a certain audience: “It’s the innovative nature of his work. Some clients aren’t interested in taking a lot of risks. Tom attracts the adventuresome ones.”

The Brodskys had been down the custom-built road before. In 2001, they’d hired architect Robert A.M. Stern to design a house near the water in East Hampton, New York, which resulted in a French provincial beach getaway—“a good place to live with family and dogs,” Estrellita says. This time she in particular wanted something that would bring them closer to the land.

A zinc roof and steel chimney caps adorn the main house. **PHOTO:** FRANÇOIS COQUEREL FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

The carmine red of the massive steel front door was chosen from Le Corbusier's color palette. PHOTO: FRANÇOIS COQUEREL FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

friend's farm in Millerton. She offered to fix it up in exchange for her birds' room and board, an arrangement that worked out well, at least for a while. "And then I didn't like how they were being treated," she recalls. "I didn't want to be running an SRO hotel for chickens."

Painful though the Araucana episode was, it whetted the Brodskys' appetite for farming and the open-sky meadows around Millerton, a two-stoplight town that nonetheless has its own movie theater and a classic diner. Their friend Tom Campbell, then the director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, owned a place nearby; Dan Brodsky has been chairman of the board of the Met since 2011, and the proximity had its conveniences.

The parcel they settled on in 2012 encompassed an undulating hillside dotted with spring creeks, advancing south to a valley where they imagined building a coop for their affable, decidedly free-range brood and a barnlike house for themselves. Kundig admired the land's gentle topography and its agricultural past. After a few false starts, he and the Brodskys decided that the house would sit near the top of the sloping acreage to provide views of the valley floor and the Catskill Mountains in the distance. The hillside was steep and plagued

POWER HOUSE Estrellita purchased the Le Corbusier tapestry in the entry hall for her husband. It hangs above a Norwegian bench. **PHOTO:** FRANÇOIS COQUEREL FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

with drainage issues, but Kundig felt it offered the optimal vantage point for a dwelling he intended as an observatory. And by tucking the building into the rise, he was paying homage to a tradition of preserving the most arable land for cultivation, the same principle he'd used for the rockbound Pierre house.

For two years, on and off, the Brodskys met with their architect to discuss what the new house would be. Construction took another two years. "The site work was very difficult," Dan Brodsky says. "We're on a hill, so they had to cut into the hill and flatten this area. The cut was probably 16 feet high. And a huge amount of water comes down here. So we put in drainage to go around the house."

From a quiet two-lane road, the Brodskys' new home is just barely visible at the end of a meandering driveway. Notched into the hillside like an alpine hut, the simple oblong box flickers in and out of view as light catches its windowed facade, while the sludge-colored walls disappear into the earth. Unlike many of Kundig's early rural cabins, skinned in concrete and weathered steel to match their extreme environments, the Millerton house has a muted, almost utilitarian aspect that echoes the local farmstead vernacular. Reclaimed barn siding, board-

CUSTOM CONTENT Kundig designed many of the house's furnishings, including Estrellita's L-shaped steel desk. PHOTO: FRANÇOIS COQUEREL FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

> **'Sometimes if you fight an architect, they throw up their hands and say, 'Just do what you want.' we didn't want Tom to do that.'**
>
> —Daniel Brodsky

formed concrete and double-height window walls make up the silvery exterior, and a zinc roof caps the main house and its adjacent guesthouse, joined by a covered walkway.

There's plenty of steel on the inside, though, starting with a 900-pound front door that glides open like a bank vault (a fabricator was flown in from Seattle to install it and calibrate the swing). "It's really become Tom's identity," says Olson of the material. He's watched his partner experiment with various applications over the years, pushing the obdurate stuff in ever more expressive directions—and "leading other architects down that path," Olson adds proudly.

In Millerton, Kundig designed kitchen cabinets faced in steel as well as hardware, lighting and various furnishings, including a refined desk for Estrellita that cascades to the floor in soft curves. And then there are the steel "gizmos," as the architect calls them, scattered around the

Glass-paned walls, meeting at a corner of the kitchen, open and close via a hand-crank system by Kundig; he also designed the steel dining table. PHOTO: FRANÇOIS COQUEREL FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

house like grown-up toys. Kundig studied physics at the University of Washington before turning to architecture, and the idea of introducing movement and a spoonful of Rube Goldberg whimsy to stationary objects has always appealed to him. He has designed hand-cranked window walls, a fireplace that rotates 180 degrees to face inside or out (weather depending) and huts of patinated steel that can be rolled around like wheelbarrows in a field. Each is an invitation to participate in the physical performance of a house—and take notice of the effort it requires. “He reminds us that small moments in life are precious,” architect Billie Tsien has written of Kundig. “That is his gift to us.”

Dan Brodsky delights in the singularity of the couple’s new home. “Tom made some very specific details,” he says over lunch at Kundig’s thick-edged steel table, positioned to take in a view of the couple’s British White cows munching grass in the distant meadow and falcons wheeling overhead. “He didn’t talk about that so much. But in a lot of other ways, he was very easygoing. He said, ‘It’s your house.’”

Kundig’s remark was both flattering and a little unsettling for the developer to hear. “I did go after him,” Dan says. “I really pushed this idea: ‘I want your vision, I want your architecture.’

Sometimes if you fight an architect, they just throw up their hands and say, ‘Oh, look, just do what you want to do.’ And we didn’t want Tom to do that.”

GREEN SCREEN Shrubs and grasses capable of withstanding a little benign neglect surround the pool. The property’s fields have been leased for the cultivation of corn and soybeans. PHOTO: FRANÇOIS COQUEREL FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

As a teenager, Dan had a memorable encounter with one of the pricklier architectural auteurs of the modern era: Charles-Édouard Jeanneret, better known as Le Corbusier. The family of one of his grade-school friends had a farmhouse in the Springs, a working-class section of East Hampton popular with artists from the postwar avant-garde, and Le Corbusier occasionally stayed there as a guest of the boy’s father, Costantino Nivola, an artist and sometime professor at Harvard’s Graduate School of Design. Dan remembers the brash, colorful mural the architect swabbed across two walls of the Nivola family living room.

“I just found that very exciting, hanging out with an artist and all of his friends,” he says of the Nivolas’ circle, which included Lee Krasner and Jackson Pollock, Saul Steinberg and Alexander Calder, among others. “He used to have these young students come and apprentice with him. I was a little snotty 12-year-old, but I loved the idea of helping them in their work. That did influence me. It piqued my interest in architecture, and then in the arts.” As soon as he could afford it, Dan became a collector of Le Corbusier drawings and paintings, a practice that has since become a minor obsession; a tapestry by the architect hangs in the Millerton entry hall, and the front door is painted carmine red from the palette he developed for use in his immaculate, highly systematized modern villas.

Kundig’s oeuvre owes a clear debt to the master, though his own machines for living are much more personable. For one thing, they’re compositionally nimbler, allowing for the easy addition or subtraction of windows. As he drew up his plan for the three-bedroom, 5,000-square-foot interior in Millerton, the architect prioritized broad expanses of wall space and sight lines to

> **‘Dan and Esty wanted a quiet architecture. It’s intended to be a peaceful building in the landscape. Then Inside, it’s a big yin and yang.’**
>
> —Tom Kundig

make room for the Brodskys’ art collection. “You try to understand the scale of the art, so you don’t eat the art—or underscale the wall,” he explains. “You try and find a sweet spot.”

The house now holds part of the couple’s collection of contemporary Latin American paintings, including works by Oscar Murillo and William Cordova, often paired with furnishings by Jorge Zalszupin and other increasingly sought-after South American modernists. Estrellita, whose parents emigrated from Uruguay and Venezuela as newlyweds, made Latin American modernism the subject of her Ph.D. dissertation in art history and regularly curates in her specialty; in 2016, she oversaw an exhibition of the Argentine abstractionist Julio Le Parc at the Pérez Art Museum Miami, and she’s endowed curatorial chairs in Latin American art at the Museum of Modern Art, the Met and the Tate in London. For his part, Dan has sponsored a curatorial chair in architecture and design at the Met—“the first time they’ve ever had one,” he notes. “Being part of the design process here, in this house, has been fun.”

In the living room, a low-riding Jorge Zalszupin lounge chair, center, shares the space with a pair of vintage wicker Easy Armchairs by Pierre Jeanneret, rear. **PHOTO:** FRANÇOIS COQUEREL FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

Less fun, perhaps, have been Brodsky’s past few years at the Met. There was the sudden exit of director Tom Campbell in 2017, followed by the search for a replacement—Max Hollein was installed earlier this year—and a painfully public conversation about financial shortfalls and how culture should be funded.

The museum imposed mandatory admission fees for out-of-state visitors this past spring, after decades of a universal pay-as-you-wish policy, which generated noisy pushback. “We thought a lot about it, and I just think they’re wrong,” Dan says of those who opposed the fees. “The government doesn’t want to get involved;

the city doesn’t have the resources,” Dan says. He notes that the land under the David Koch Theater is likewise owned by the city. “So why is the New York City Ballet not free? We have 2,200 employees. The Michelangelo show took eight years—a curator spending 80 percent of her time for eight years on that. The Met needs to be funded.”

A view of Daniel and Estrellita Brodsky’s home in Millerton, New York. **PHOTO:** FRANÇOIS COQUEREL FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

what would life be—or art, or marriage, for that matter—without a little conflict? Kundig says the push and pull with the Brodskys over door swings, paint colors and load-bearing concrete walls amounted to business as usual. More meaningful for him has been the chance to set up a new encounter between people and place: bracing, intimate, vulnerable at times, which was the point. This is how he thinks we should live in the world—in sunlight and in darkness, as nature intends.

“I grew up skiing, and my favorite thing was skiing the trees,” Kundig recalls. “You avoid the trees, but you’re having fun working your way through a series of situations. And if you’re smart about it, and if you’re skilled about it, as in skiing, you can actually have a really cool run. You may not quite know where you’re going, but you’re having this really cool, jazzlike conversation with the landscape.”

Built By:

United Construction & Engineering Inc.
111 Thomaston Road
Litchfield, CT. 06759

(p) (860) 489 7273

www.uce-gc.com / instagram.com/uce_ct