

' ALWAYS BUILD FOR YOUR CLIENT'S CLIENT '

Alan Lapidus is back in business.

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in autumn of 2001, Alan Lapidus shuttered his New York office and, after nearly four decades as an architect, retired to New England. In 2007 he wrote a memoir called *Everything by Design: My Life as an Architect*, further cementing that titled life into the past tense. Now, driving from the airport in Portland, Maine, to his home in Naples, Lapidus is back in present tense, telling me about a new project he's getting off the ground: a ryokan (a traditional, full-service Japanese inn) to be sited in Palm Beach, Florida. Currently in the legal stages of development, the project has been in Lapidus's back pocket since 1978.

This I learn in the first ten minutes of our drive. There are 45 more to go. 'Would've been a lot faster by ski plane,' Lapidus, a former pilot, tells me. I am not wanting in-flight entertainment, though. Barely pausing for breath, Lapidus segues into stories about working with Donald Trump, with Aristotle Onassis on

a project killed by Jackie, and with Michael Graves on a collaboration for Disney (the Swan and Dolphin resort). At a red light, he recalls the best clients he ever had – 'the Mafia guys. They really respect architects.' Their only downside is when they get anxious that a hotel won't open for high season. Going into full *Goodfellas* mode, Lapidus quotes a 1965 conversation with his client for the El Conquistador Resort in Puerto Rico: 'Alan, if it don't open for the season, I cut your heart out.'

Over the course of a day, Lapidus goes on to share his experiences as a cop, as a CIA operative and, perhaps most poignantly, as the son of architect Morris Lapidus. Now considered a father of postmodernism, Morris was once kicked out of the AIA. Initially, Alan was reluctant to place himself under his father's 'despotic authority', so his first job as junior draughtsman was with Skidmore, Owings & Merrill. At his father's ▶





Alan Lapidus as a pilot.

◀ unusually warm invitation, however, Alan joined the office of Morris Lapidus in the early '60s, working there for over a decade before opening his own firm. Now, with one foot back in the world he thought he'd left, the junior Lapidus tells me about his new project and breaks into his vault of old stories.

Why is your ryokan just coming to fruition now?

Alan Lapidus: In the '70s, people were still of the 'they bombed Pearl Harbor' mentality. Now? My God, you can get sushi in rural Maine. But the idea came from my working on many hotels, thinking: one of these days I'd like to design a hotel I'd want to stay in. I found the US hotel experience lacking in courtesy and personal service, whereas at a ryokan your every move is anticipated. I mean, you come back to your room and your bath is drawn. It's actually not so different from immersing yourself in a casino or Disney: you enter a total experience. Except in this case the experience is 'Let's play shogun.' I realized that's something I could transport to the United States, along with the serenity and beauty of traditional Japanese architecture.

I take it that aesthetically the ryokan won't be another Trump Tower ...

It's a basic, two-storey, wood-framed building with stucco, and it will be located in the Morikami Gardens, a park established by the Japanese at the beginning of the twentieth century. But, you know, when I design something, I design everything down to the hardcover book you get when you make a reservation. I find that it's much better to be my own client than to have to rely on somebody else.

'ARCHITECTS STRUGGLE LIKE HELL TO MAKE A LIVING'

Alan at the opening of the Bedford-Stuyvesant swimming pool with Mayor John Lindsay and Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm.



Though you've had some colourful clients.

I've definitely been behind the scenes of Disney, the Mafia, the casinos, even the CIA.

Are we talking classified information here?

Well, there's great use for an international architect as a CIA operative; nobody questions where you're going and why. When I went to Moscow in 1997, for example, it was ostensibly to redo the Hotel Moskva – which happens to be where the representatives to the Duma stayed. So, while I was going through the hotel and inspecting everything, my associates were planting bugs throughout the building. My contact at the White House kept calling and saying, 'You realize you can get killed doing this.' An American hotel guy had just been machine-gunned to death the week before I arrived. Meanwhile, my CIA contact in Moscow, a colonel-general of the KGB, tells me: 'Those hoodlums who shot [the hotel guy] are nothing but scum ... but they're excellent mechanics. They used an AK-47 – good gun, not very accurate – put 17 bullets in him, and didn't even get his bodyguard.' At least they respected each other's craft!

Do you think of your experiences as typical of those of an everyday working architect?

My experiences aren't typical, but they do illustrate the extremes of what an architect must be. Architects struggle like hell to make a living. When I taught, I told my students that, sure, in their Materials of Architectural Construction course they learn all about steel, wood and brick – but there's only one material without which there is no architecture: money. When the economy gets a cold, architects get pneumonia. Nobody loans, nobody builds. After the great crash of 1989, I went bankrupt [having taken out a line of credit for \$1 million to finance a Marriott Hotel project, which was later cancelled]. That's the one thing I can't forgive my father – he never told me things could stop.

That can't be the only thing you don't forgive him.

I will say, I may have some ego, but most of the ego in my family was used up by my father. [Laughs.] I don't begrudge him that, though. He had a very hard time; his ego was his defence. He was despised by his profession, and as a result I grew up with a chip on my shoulder. You know, Morris never taught me

'MY FATHER NEVER TOLD ME THINGS COULD STOP'

architecture with a capital A. What I took away from him was his philosophy: Always build for your client's client. That proved an important lesson when I was designing hotels and resorts, which are essentially three-dimensional wish fulfilments.

Was being an architect named Lapidus a cross to bear?

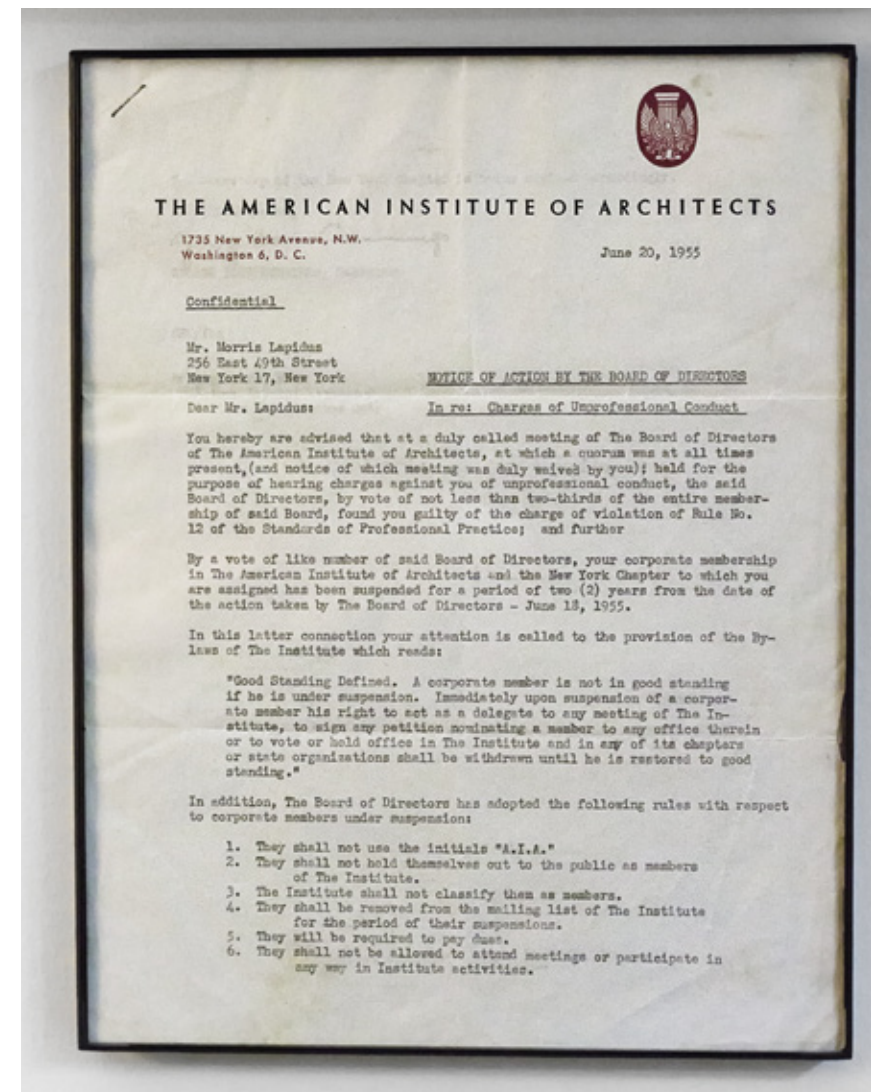
I didn't have a happy time with other architects. I mean, my first-year design professor was Gerhard Kallmann, founder of the brutalist movement. My first day of architecture school he saw my name on the drawing board and said, 'God help us.' Welcome to architecture school, right?

I always knew my father had an amazing mind, though. The criticism he received for Fontainebleau [hotel in Miami Beach] was way over the top. *The New York Times* architectural critic wrote, 'Not a bad building, if you're totally blind.' The editor of

Architectural Record called my father to say, 'I'll never publish a work of yours again. How dare you curve a building?' Vicious stuff. But they were wrong, and he was right. It's as simple as that. [Architect] Dan Solomon put it best when he once introduced me at a lecture by saying: 'If 200 million Americans think that the Fontainebleau is the living end, while 20 thousand American architects think it's a piece of garbage, maybe the architects need to re-evaluate their position.' To this day, architectural criticism makes me totally crazy.

Of course, toward the end of his life, Morris was widely praised by critics and architects and won several prestigious awards. You have received critical praise as well. This hasn't influenced your views?

I'm glad my father lived to see the day, but I still believe architecture is a visceral art and doesn't need a filter. I understand music and film criticism; you want somebody you trust to tell you whether a concert or movie is any good before you pay money to see it yourself. But architecture? The building's right there: take a look. You don't need somebody to tell you what you're seeing. If a person goes into a building and feels that it's a wonderful space, then all the verbiage in the world isn't going to change that. I mean, the fact that everyone's online now, offering their opinions – I think that's terrific for architecture. All I can say is, thank God. ◀



Alan Lapidus in front of one of his own works.

Letter from the American Institute of Architects to Alan's father Morris Lapidus, in which he is charged of unprofessional conduct and suspended for a period of two years.