Welcome to our Ordinary issue. This issue seeks to explore the value of commonness and the everyday environment. It focuses on those elements that go unnoticed or that we take for granted, from buildings and objects to experiences and traditions. We look at the ordinary elements of life that are worth rediscovering and celebrating, as well as look ahead to what will become ordinary in the future.
During a recent trip to my hometown, I realized that I had become, for a lack of a better word, a local tourist. Nothing that I did during my trip was new: I went to places that I had seen many times before, ate food that I grew up with, and attended celebrations that were a routine for years. However, having lived away from the city for many years made all those ordinary moments special. Every little detail became important and I paid close attention to things that I had taken for granted for many years.

The trip pointed out something important: the need to look and enjoy all the ordinary places and moments in the city that we call home. We go through our lives without noticing them until one day, we realize that they are no longer there: the local bar by your house, the traditional business impossible to replace, the unassuming building, or the dinners with friends that you expect to happen forever.

Now, I am looking forward to rediscovering the ordinary elements of Chicago that I take for granted.

“It’s truly a common man marvels at uncommon things and a wise man marvels at the commonplace.”
CONFUCIUS

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Superordinary: On the *Problematique* of the Ordinary

Essay by Antonio Petrov
No question about it, the obsession of the age is for the original version. Only the original possesses an aura, this mysterious and mystical quality that no second hand version will ever get. But paradoxically, this obsession for pinpointing originality increases proportionally with the availability and accessibility of more and more copies of better and better quality. 

Bruno Latour

How do we articulate architecture as an expanded definition that infinitely varies in forms and aesthetic conventions, evolved, changed, and disintegrated beyond politically charged (canonical) constructions? And how do we move past the exhaustion of theories and speculations that have acquired an aura of something akin to intelligence to confront a continually contested subject?

Needless to say, to find answers is complex. Any attempt to capture the multifarious territory of theory and practice seem implausible; no single definition or spatial determination can include its multivalent readings, cultivations, and mappings; we call for broader and more nuanced definitions and continue to question the role, or rather, if architecture is the answer. For more than half a millennium, or at least since the days when Leone Battista Alberti or Andrea Palladio designed “extraordinary” villas for their patrons in Italy, architecture has lost the ability to critically mediate between ethical positions and aesthetic formulations. Stereotyping, idiosyncratic characterizations, and the oxymoronic problematization of the larger subject only indicate how bounded, or genuinely unbounded, architecture and its discourses are. It seems as if there is no capacity to extend the means of its own determination beyond the own self. The grand western narratives not only continue to yield this fruitful picture—of the previously dismissed particulars that belie any canonical view—but also the uses to which such interpretations were in fact put.

My account will not assume or attempt to clarify the contested relationships between history, theory, and practice; or architecture and the city, in which architecture is subsumed in the ordinary and extends itself through it. Rather, the relationships I attempt to associate with are relations to a “third” condition, the “superordinary,” and how it recovers new dialogues and new lines of critical inquiry. In contention is not the question, “what is ordinary?” but “how is ordinary?”—in all of its compelling forms—appropriated, adopted, or adapted in the social, cultural, and political realms beyond the presumed qualities of the “extraordinary.”

Against this backdrop, notions of superordinary conceptualize nuances and appropriations of contemporary design culture and its underlying theoretical underpinnings, with the objective to recover productive links at a deeper thematic and methodological level. I argue that the epistemological framework of the “superordinary” contributes to a clearer logic toward a shift in focus from aesthetic conventions to critical dialogues between culture and design, meaning and form, knowing and knower, creation and dissemination, extending the discussions beyond the autonomous project and singularity, and thus a deeper exploration of its own possibilities.

While the extraordinary is formulated through aesthetic discourses, the superordinary turns to the absence, or the matter-of-fact presence, of the unnoticeable in an attempt to clarify its paradoxical relationship to architecture and the city. For architecture, this means that we generally don’t think to design something that would be considered ordinary. If anything, we fear of critics saying our designs are not special. As architects, we believe our work is (always) extraordinary or “super,” meaning excellent, very good, or at least pleasant. Something ordinary would be considered mundane—that implies a lack of specialness or distinct features, and could be regarded as not worthy of “design.” However, the routine and all other aspects that determine the ordinary make up a reality that seems unnoticed, or at best is absent in design discourses.

This brief characterization may help to make a distinction between “extraordinary” and “superordinary.” However, in a reading of coincidentia oppositorum (unity of opposites), the Greek philosopher Heraclitus suggests how opposing forces are necessary for the existence of things in the material world. The unity of opposites is derived from the thesis of an object and its antithesis, which provide the reference point from which to describe each and quantify them as objects. In this context, the term “extraordinary” does not necessarily help to further define the ordinary other than being “hyperordinary” or “veryordinary.” In fact, it is the amplification of ordinary with no need for specific reference to the “ordinary” subject. Thus, the definition of “superordinary” may provide an antithesis of ordinary that helps to define each, as the ordinary can only clearly exist in the presence of the “superordinary.” In his theory of dialectics, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel presupposes the factual basis

Le Corbusier, Villa Savoye, ca. 1959.
for the existence of contradictions and clarifies how opposites are essential to the process of learning. Everything can be understood by its opposite, and if we only understand something through its own meaning we gain no new evidence. In this sense, the superordinary can best be defined as a certain type of presence, not absence, and it is this abstract, intangible, and perhaps habitual presence what distinguishes the superordinary from ordinary. It is also a moment in which the extraordinary breaks from the ordinary; this paradoxical relationship may only materialize its temporal nature in the superordinary ex post facto.

So then what exactly is superordinary? Is it something that takes time to understand? Does its history, and relationship to society, culture, environment, ecology, and material and cultural aesthetics require time, or knowledge to be noticed? Or is it unnoticeable because it contains elements we find neutral, the traits of life we don’t think about that surpass our consciousness with aesthetics that have become something we, everybody, can refer to through everyday use? Who wants to have the ordinary if they can have something extraordinary? Can the superordinary be defined as the absence of something, or as something without identity, style, or originality? Or is the superordinary just the opposite of extraordinary, only on a super-scale?

Based on the terminology, it is very hard to fathom if the superordinary is an oxymoron in which the super opposes the ordinary, if it is “super” beyond “extra,” or if it is the absolute opposite in which the superordinary determines the superlativeness of ordinary to its greatest degree in its ontological form. Although the etymology of what is considered “ordinary” relates to something “normal” with no special features, in the context of what we determine as superordinary, they are anything but ordinary. Is it something that already exists and is so ordinary that it is familiar, but seeks to go beyond “normality,” which is relative, by “concentrating all quality of normality”?

Merriam Webster defines “super” as something “of high grade or quality.” But it is not until the third category of definition that we actually gain any insight: “exhibiting the characteristic of its type to an excessive degree.” This “type” is the “ordinary.” Surprisingly, the dictionary only explains the most common usage of “ordinary” in its third definition: “the regular or customary condition or course of things.” If we were to attempt to, without specific reference, define the term “superordinary” it may go thusly: “characteristics of a customary condition to an excessive degree.” This definition, of course, is not satisfactory as it only mirrors the description of “extraordinary,” which in the context of this text is ironic, if not counterproductive. We must find where superordinary has specific meaning—if it is to have any meaning at all. There are many factors to consider: ideas about aesthetics, community, usage, and what we define as ordinary become very important in the epiphany that the superordinary is all around us. Why have the ordinary when we could have the superordinary? What happens when the super and the ordinary come together—are we throwing out our perceived notions of the two (words) as singular objects? Are we beginning to fantasize about something more, something utopian, and possibly impossible to achieve but wonderful to strive for?

The familiarity and simultaneous ambiguity of the superordinary evokes images that possibly transcend cultural meanings, architectural aesthetics, and materialities that already exist. These associations, and our expectations of it, leave us indifferent and characterize the superordinary as an absence of something, perhaps something that has no real meaning. For example, the “low” was the product of local knowledge, of the craft tradition. So while this aesthetic attitude condescended to the low, it also gave it a new visibility in the landscape. Rather than dismissing the low as the simple negation or absence of the “high,” this aesthetic conceded legitimacy to the low as a foil for the high. However, who determines what is high or low? For urban sociologist Richard Sennett this is a question of wholeness. In his book, The Conscience of the Eye: The Design and Social Life of Cities, he argues,

The Ancient Greek could use his or her eyes to see the complexities of life. The temples, markets, playing fields, meeting places, public sanctuaries, and paintings of the ancient city represented the culture’s values in religion, politics, and family life. . . . One difference between the Greek past and the present is that whereas the ancients could use their eyes in the city to think about political, religious, and erotic experiences, modern culture suffers from a divide between the inside and outside. It is a divide between subjective experience and worldly experience, self and city.6

In each of these instances, the superordinary (as well as the extraordinary) is evident in its determinacy of the time and setting in which it is addressed; the superordinary recovers the true potential of the whole, and transfers consciousness from the individual to the larger collective.
It is not only a framework of a consciously built environment, but also one of collective perception and engagement with it. This environment, as architectural historian and philosopher Lewis Mumford puts it, “is the point of maximum concentration for the power and culture of a community.” In his view the city is not only a product of time, a place that represents maximum possibility of “humanizing the natural environment and naturalizing the human heritage, but it gives a cultural shape to the first, and it externalizes, in permanent collective forms, the second.” Moreover, it is also a place “where the diffuse rays of many separate beams of life fall into focus, with gains in both social effectiveness and significance.” Therefore, I understand the superordinary in Mumford’s terms as a “fact in nature, like a cave, a run of mackerel or an ant-heap. But it is also a conscious work of art, and it holds within its communal framework many simpler and more personal forms of art.”

It can be felt and observed in locations from the most obscure and trivial to the most high and sacred, but everything is derived from the ordinary perception of a space and how one understands it through their own experience. To read the superordinary is to always chase something that has just ceased to be. Its temporal nature seems to disrupt the study of static buildings, but if we are to understand the production of space as a social construction, the superordinary seems to agree with the philosophy of the inhabitant as the subject who engenders the space with meaning. Correspondingly, the concept of superordinary defies canonical orders, and allows opportunities to explore a broader more nuanced picture of new social, cultural, and politically complexities in which diverse readings of architecture sanction the problematization of complex relationships between form, function, meaning, the knower, and the known. It constructs a more distinct, a broader, more interdisciplinary, and perhaps an even more twenty-first century perspective of architecture dismantling its paradoxical relationship to itself and the city.
Can Architecture Be Ordinary?

Essay by Deborah Fausch

Liel House, view from street. © Stephen Mill
Can architecture be ordinary? Or, perhaps a better question, what is architecture’s relationship to the ordinary? To answer this question, we must first ask another: what is “the ordinary”?

The ordinary is part of a field, a nexus of ideas that includes the everyday and the quotidian, the accustomed, the habitual, and the recurrent, the unremarkable, the banal, and the boring, the average, the mundane, the secular and the profane, the undesigned and the unrepresented, the imperfect, and the irregular. It is the common, the private, and the domestic—in Adolf Loos’s terms, the house as opposed to tomb and monument. It is the standard as opposed to the unique, promoted by the German modernists, the typical, endorsed by Le Corbusier, the type, articulated by Aldo Rossi, and the conventional as opposed to the original, advocated by Robert Venturi. Again, for Rossi it is the fabric and the district as opposed to the monument. For Bernard Rudofsky it is the vernacular as opposed to the individually authored.1

In art, the vernacular, the popular, and craft are opposed to the fine, and in nineteenth-century realism, which sought to portray scenes from the everyday life of the common people, the ordinary is opposed to the noble and mythological subjects of history painting. In the twentieth century, deadpan display and pop exaggeration of the ordinary are opposed to abstract expressionism.

In many ways the ordinary is a derivative, even negative category, opposed to positive qualities that it is not—not elite, not exceptional, not interesting, not unique, not extraordinary. The ordinary is common, boring, and banal, irregular and imperfect, whereas the extraordinary—that which is outside of or in excess of the ordinary—is noble, novel, individual, progressive, noteworthy, unexpected, excellent, ideal, even perfect, transcendent, rich, rare, and ornamental. Some of the older meanings of ordinary come from the Christian liturgical cycle—ordinary days as opposed to feast days. In this sense, the ordinary is opposed to the sacred, designating that which is not endowed with the magic and mystery, the numinous qualities of the eternal, the magical, and the dream. But the characteristics of the sacred can alter. Whereas in an earlier period the sacred embodies the regular, the regulated, and the perfect, in the twentieth century, according to Henri Lefebvre, the unremarked and unremarkable quotidian has been replaced by the regulated life of a planned society. He proposes, as an alternative to the planned, the festival, a new, exceptional space, a kind of earthly eternal, in which ordinary, regulated time is replaced by festival time.2

The festival introduces the idea of the aesthetic, and with modern secularity, the aesthetic replaces the sacred as the agent and locus of numinosity. Here the ordinary enters into a new opposition, becoming that which is not art. And art, in its turn, takes up the job of reforming the ordinary.

All of this casts the ordinary as leftover, comedown, fallen. However, there is another sense of the word that defines the ordinary as something valuable in its own right. Ordinary is an old word, found in classical Latin as ordinarius, derived from ordo, order. Ordinarius means regular, orderly, by right, in the normal course of things. Judges and church officials are “ordinary” if regularly appointed, and have jurisdiction over normal situations. The word comes to mean those things that are unvarying, and also a rule for behavior, as in the Ordinary of the Mass.3 In this older sense, ordinary is a positive quality rather than a negative one, something that is as it should be, something that is orderly and ordained. Architecture is ordinary in this sense, in that it ordains an ordinance, a way of being and doing, by means of its form.

Architecture’s romance with the ordinary is coextensive with modernity, according to Peter Collins. Collins claims that the period from 1750 to 1950 is distinguished by the fact that the villa or small house becomes, not only a legitimate subject of architectural investigation for the first time, but the paradigm for all of architecture.4 Villas are at first the province of the wealthy, but the principles of picturesque irregularity, when mixed with utopian socialism, progressive reform movements, the drive to improve the quality of manufactured goods in Germany and England, and the search for “the style representative of the times,” become a program for the design of the new ordinary in the twentieth century. And with the avant-garde, the ordinary becomes an agent of revolution.

The idea that art can be revolutionary is traceable at least to the composer Richard Wagner, who believes that the Gesamtkunstwerk or “total work of art” will bring about the social transformation that the Revolution of 1848 in Germany fails to produce.5 In architecture, Wagner’s compatriot Gottfried Semper, and after him Otto Wagner, search for “the style for the times” that will reform architecture. For Adolf Loos, the style for the times—sober, recessive, and interiorized—will reform society as well. Loos subscribes to the traditional opposition between high and low, overlaid by that of revolutionary and conservative:
The work of art is revolutionary; the house is conservative. The work of art shows people new directions and thinks of the future. The house thinks of the present. Does it follow that the house has nothing in common with art and is architecture not to be included in the arts? Only a very small part of architecture belongs to art: the tomb and the monument. Everything else that fulfills a function is to be excluded from the domain of art.  

Following Loos, Le Corbusier declares: “Architecture or revolution. Revolution can be avoided.” Substituting the planned for the quotidian, architecture is to remake the ordinary, creating new type-forms for the homme-type, the ordinary or typical human being (“If our spirits vary, our skeletons are alike”). Engineering modern life by means of that locus of ordinary life, the dwelling, Le Corbusier aims to create a new ordinary, a new “natural order of things,” adequate to the times. Thus the ordinary as a new order or rule will reform the fallen, profane ordinary of existing everyday life.

The two, in some ways opposite senses of the ordinary that we have defined coexist uneasily in artistic practice, exemplified in architectural modernism on the one hand, which attempts to create a new world by means of design, and deadpan and pop on the other hand, which aim to present the ordinary as extraordinary. In architecture, the questions posed by deadpan and pop are: Can the ordinary be portrayed as it is? Gayatri Spivak notes that the very act of labeling a part of experience “everyday” alters its fluid immersion in an ongoing stream of events, substituting for the “unconceptualized” nature of the quotidian a hypostasized mental object formed according to the rules of theoretical operations. Does the very portrayal alter its quotidian, fugitive, flowing quality? A further question is: Can architecture represent and not propose? Can an activity that intervenes in the ordinary refrain from ordaining?

The questions raised by architectural modernism are: Can the common, everyday, banal, and unnoticed be designed at all without destroying its essential nature as unremarkable, unremarked, and unplanned? Can an architecture that designs the ordinary, in other words, itself be ordinary? Or does it not, by its reform of the ordinary, step outside of that realm into that of the artful, and therefore the extraordinary?

These paradoxes are the subject of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown’s theory and designs, which examine the ordinary in many of its manifestations, taking on the question of the “is” versus the “ought” that underlies the two definitions of the ordinary. Venturi’s book Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture (1966) explores the conventional, the vernacular, and the undesigned; in Learning from Las Vegas (1972) Venturi and Scott Brown take as an object of serious study the contemporary, “fallen” ordinary of gas stations, strip malls, shopping centers, and suburban subdivisions. Venturi and Scott Brown oppose the everyday “is” to the ideal “ought” of modernism, asserting that before dictating to it, architecture must learn from its environment.

Allusion and comment, on the past or present or on our great commonplaces or old clichés, and inclusion of the everyday in the environment, sacred and profane—these are what are lacking in present-day modern architecture. We can learn about them from Las Vegas as have other artists from their own profane and stylistic sources.

However, by studying Las Vegas, Venturi and Scott Brown approach the ordinary by means of the extraordinary. And, perhaps influenced by its hypertrophied environment, Venturi and Scott Brown’s solution to the problem of designing the ordinary comprises two techniques: deadpan and exaggeration.

The deadpan in art addresses the first definition of the ordinary as the quotidian. It is epitomized in Marcel Duchamp’s Fountain of 1917, a urinal sanctified to artistic status by its installation in Alfred Stieglitz’s New York art gallery 291. Venturi and Scott Brown’s more immediate source for deadpan technique is Edward Ruscha’s photographs of Los Angeles and Las Vegas in art books such as Every Building on the Sunset Strip and Thirtyfour Parking Lots. In Learning from Las Vegas, Venturi and Scott Brown produce a two-page spread that imitates Ruscha’s Sunset Strip pictures. A series of photos taken by a camera mounted on a pickup truck display without comment the entire length of both sides of the Las Vegas strip.

But what worked for Duchamp and Ruscha does not work as well for architecture. Lacking a special locus removed from everyday life to mark it off from the ordinary, architecture cannot rely on its location to designate it as such. Thus the difficulty for Venturi and Scott Brown is to translate theory into practice. Venturi and Scott Brown’s 1967 Brighton Beach Housing Competition entry is an example of this deadpan approach to the ordinary. Its contextual massing and conventional construction, plans, and façades fly in the face of the revolutionary aims.
Can Architecture Be Ordinary?

Imaged in the modern megastructures then in fashion.
The essential problem with this project, as far as the competition jury is concerned, is that it is so contextual that there is no way to tell that it is architecture. Philip Johnson sums up this criticism by calling the project “ugly and ordinary,” an appellation Venturi and Scott Brown adopt as their byline.

Lieb House (Barnegat Light, New Jersey, 1969) epitomizes the opposite technique. Following in a long American tradition from Frank Furness to Henry Hobson Richardson, Venturi and Scott Brown eschew the role of the architect who orders and ordains, instead employing the extraordinary to represent the ordinary. This “bold little banal box,” as Venturi called it, is set in an ordinary environment, the New Jersey shorefront. Its main ornament is a huge number 9, easy to locate in the flat, featureless, alienated world of telephone wires, sandy paths, and houses that looked alike even though they are all different. The bored mother and children sitting on the front steps epitomize the banality of everyday life. Yet the house is anything but banal. Flat roofed rather than pitched as are its neighbors, the building forms an outsized object, odd and undecipherable, giving the faintly comic impression of an overinflated balloon or something seen in a fish eye lens.

In both plan and massing, the house makes reference to Le Corbusier’s Villa Savoye (Poissy, Yvelines, France, 1931). Like that of Le Corbusier’s villa, Lieb House’s layout is an inversion of the ordinary American house plan: the living room and kitchen are on the second floor, the premier étage, where the views are, with four small bedrooms on the first floor. The first thing encountered upon entering is a service area with washer and dryer to receive bathing suits and beach towels. This layout combines an attention to the expediencies of beach life with an inversion of the expected. Collapsing the main floor terrace in the Villa Savoye with its roof deck, in the Lieb House a partially screened terrace is carved out of the almost square rectangle of the house.

The Villa Savoye exploits the capacity of its then-novel reinforced concrete frame structure to allow for long horizontal openings and flowing facades, articulating the surface as light, non-loadbearing construction covering a supporting frame. In a similar vein, Lieb House makes reference to balloon frame construction, a vernacular and mass-market form of building developed in the United States. Composed of a uniform network of small members, joists and studs, with minimal reinforcement at floor levels and around openings, the surface sheathing plays as necessary a part in the structure as do those members.
Thus holes can be punched virtually anywhere without weakening the frame.

This characteristic of the structure allows Venturi and Scott Brown a free hand with the building's façade. The formal mechanisms of the volume and the façade are not those of the deadpan, but rather the extraordinary mechanisms of pop art. Like pop, the house employs exaggeration, inversion, and distortion; paradox, humor, and ambiguity; scale shifts and unorthodox organization to call attention to the ordinary at the same time as it flouts its conventions. These devices, articulated mainly in window size and placement, make complex allusions, not only to international modernism, but also to American Shingle Style architecture, itself a play on traditional American wood frame construction. The change in cladding color halfway up the façade becomes a kind of “regulating line” that organizes these deliberately disparate elements.

The overall effect of the design might be called “ugly and extraordinary.” The ugly is the other, opposite pole of the extraordinary, avoiding the previous glorification of the ordinary by means of the beautiful. As a look at the Villa Savoye shows, this is also a modernist technique. The large, flat, ungainly rectangle balanced on five spindly legs is a form whose shock value time and inurement has only somewhat blunted.

Le Corbusier’s taut, abstract volume, indebted to Purist aesthetics, makes the point that what looks massive is actually light. The forms are detailed in such a way as to reduce the building’s materiality to nearly nothing, and it seems to hover like space ship just touching down. But the Lieb House plays with heavy and light, material and immaterial, in such a way that both must be kept in mind at once. The pop elements and the realist construction materials tussle with each other, never letting the building entirely escape its nature as an actual, material object in real space and time. Le Corbusier’s construction is a novel form; Venturi and Scott Brown’s is a system with both traditional and contemporary resonance. Thus the Lieb House exists in a more complex relationship with the ordinary than does the Villa Savoye. Quotidian the Lieb House may not be; if it is a festival, however, it is a festival with one foot on the ground.

The Lieb House is an iconic example of Venturi and Scott Brown’s approach to the ordinary, which holds the paradoxes of both definitions in a relationship as taut and tense as the surface of the building itself. It also provides an example of the inscrutable status of the ordinary in a post-modern society. In 2010, Deborah Sarnoff and Robert Gotkin moved the small house to Glen Cove, New York, carefully renovating it to replicate the appearance of the original design. There it functions as a guest house on the site of their much larger dwelling, also designed by Venturi and Scott Brown in 1985. In its new site, location does finally designate architecture. What was a paradoxical presentation of the ordinary in the beach community of New Jersey now joins the urinal and the Sunset Strip as a kind of instantiation of it, ratified by its setting.

In its new location, however, the former beach cottage represents something of a conundrum. Without its ticky-tacky Jersey Shore environment to play off, it is as isolated from its former meanings as a urinal in an art gallery. Its new location and status begs several questions: Is it an example of the revival of the ordinary? Does the translation in space accomplish an archiving of modernism’s romance with the ordinary? Or, is this translation rather an attempt to redeem the ordinary?

In her first novel, *Housekeeping*, Marilynne Robinson describes a family living on the margins of an American small town, struggling to resurrect a relationship to ordinary life after it has been ruptured by a mysterious tragedy resulting in the death of the father. For this family, the problem with the ordinary is that you cannot count on it:
The fact that most moments were substantially the same did not detract at all from the possibility that the next moment might be utterly different. And so the ordinary demanded unblinking attention. Any tedious hour might be the last of its kind.15

As the characters try to restore the “dear ordinary,” “performing the rituals of the ordinary as an act of faith, as if reenacting the commonplace would make it merely commonplace again,” they discover that their former, accustomed life is irrevocably altered. The ordinary cannot be revived.16

Through the “transfiguration of the commonplace,” in Arthur Danto’s phrase, modernism sought both to design and display the ordinary.17 Here, moving the small house is an act of faith that the representation of the ordinary can be preserved. Does moving Lieb House “retransfigure the commonplace,” to alter Danto’s phrase, making the ordinary into art and thus redeeming it?18 If so, it may be a quixotic effort, since the end of Robinson’s story is the effacement of the family from the homely ordinary life of their small town, as they disappear down the road.

3 Oxford English Dictionary online, s.v. “ordinary” (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). In Livy, the meaning is a magistrate or consul appointed according to normal and legitimate procedures. It refers to a kind of soldier and a kind of servant.
11 Venturi and Scott Brown, Learning from Las Vegas, 53.
12 Edward Ruscha, Every Building on the Sunset Strip (1966); Thirtyfour Parking Lots (1967).
13 While masonry, the walls are not load bearing.
16 Robinson, Housekeeping, 15-16, 18, 25.
There are still some triangles to be found in my studio. These are used not so much for drawing, which is done in Auto-CAD, but for the many scale models that we do ourselves. When I was a child my mother used to bake the most magnificent homemade tarts. And so it is in my studio today, that I make the tarts, the scale-models, and my team makes them even better than me. Our models are always homemade.

We use triangles to control the right angle, which is a basic ingredient of architecture: the angle at which the vertical of gravity and the horizontal of the earth plane always meet. It is not by chance that the right angle has been the most used geometrical mechanism in the history of architecture: in cross-section on account of gravity, and in plan on grounds of order.

But before I proceed to say anything further about the right angle, I feel I should at this stage confess the reason I have decided to address this subject. I have read in the press that a team of American scientists based at Massachusetts General Hospital has discovered that the brain is made up of parallel and perpendicular neuronal fibers that cross paths at right angles. In other words, that the brain is square.

These latest findings from researchers using the most advanced MRI technology suggest that the physical connections of the human brain, rather than being a tangle of wires as previously believed, are arranged in an astonishingly simple crisscross pattern. It would appear therefore that the wiring of the brain is geometrically arranged in a grid structure rather like the checkerboard streets of Manhattan.
Or like the classic layout of a circuit board. It is also true to say that naturally enough the ancient tenet that the shortest distance between two points is the straight line remains true, and was not something discovered by our American scientists.

I have always been accused of obstinately insisting on and using right angles, both horizontal and vertical, while other architects are leaning, twisting, bending, curving, and folding, so you can imagine how this amazing “new” discovery was like music to my ears. With architects everywhere rolling out acute and obtuse angles, having read the news I quietly smiled to myself in my own straight-lined, rectangular, square corner. And, you know, a corner is usually just that, a straight-lined rectangular trihedron. Nevertheless many of today’s self-styled theorists prescribe angles of varying types, in fact anything but right angles, as indispensable elements allegedly lending originality and modernity to the architecture of today.

You will perhaps comprehend therefore my sheer delight on learning that the brain, which is the seat, the cradle of reason, is equipped with such an orderly, grid structure of connections, arranged orthogonally like Ikea’s Expedit shelving units, if I dare make such a comparison.

I still remember how, having commenced my studies at Madrid’s School of Architecture as an undergraduate under Alejandro de la Sota, an architect who followed in the footsteps of Tessenow and Mies, the draft designs I presented of my first project the following year were totally orthogonal. They were so imbued with German orthogonality that my new tutors were not impressed: “You have to be more expressive, less bland,” they told me. With remarkable docility I toiled diligently for the entire weekend and the following Monday I presented them with a new project full of curves and turns and expressive gestures.
heavily stamped with influences of Gaudi and Wright. They were delightful drawings that were warmly and publicly extolled by my teachers. Indeed, so warm and enthusiastic was their praise that, whether out of loyalty to Sota and Tessenow or simply following my own willful and contradictory nature, I decided on the spot to revert to my lost orthogonal designs and my right angles. As a result my work failed to receive the highest qualification from those formerly enthusiastic examiners. But, let me tell you something: that incident taught me a lot. I elected to swim against the tide for my own beliefs, as I have always done in every aspect of my life. And I continue to do so to this day, despite what others may think.

While attending the Aachen Congress on Mies van der Rohe, apart from visiting Rudolf Schwarz’s uncompromising stark church and Charlemagne’s rich Palatine chapel,

Eduardo Souto de Moura and I devoted much time to speaking about architecture. Souto, as he sipped away at his Riesling, told me with a smile that I was one of the few who had remained faithful to the straight line and the right angle. And I nodded happily in agreement on hearing such a comment from an architect of his stature.

In my latest project, a house by the sea in Zahara in the south of Spain that we have just begun to build, the right angles are so straight and upright and the box is such a straightforward box that in the end it will be a large box built in Roman travertine integrated into the sand of the beach. Its roof, a radical flat horizontal plane, is the main protagonist of the space. Like a Temenos where the gods will mingle with mortals. Like something Tessenow himself would have designed. More Tessenow than Mies.
Because there, on that exquisitely beautiful beach, gravity is the same gravity that it always has been, that of Newton’s apples, which still fall vertically, straight down, always perpendicular to the ground.

And there too in that little spot of paradise, the horizon is still horizontal. As horizontal as straight is the horizon defined by the Atlantic Ocean right in front of us.

That very same horizontal plane that Tessenow or Mies would build if they were to raise their heads not only in recognition of the work of the team of leading American scientists in discovering the physiological orthogonal arrangement of the brain, but also to corroborate something that is for them and for me so elementary as orthogonality in architecture. Because the shortest distance between two points is still the straight line. And because apples still fall vertically, orthogonally to the horizontal plane of the ground.


Following the monotonous rhythm of prefabricated elements, apartments are strung together in endless repetition until they fade away into the distance. Blind facades confine interspersed green spaces. Playgrounds are silhouetted against this backdrop like theatre equipment, temporarily taken off-stage, awaiting their cue. The window grids of office buildings structure surfaces where all depth is condensed into flatness and finally eliminated. Orderly aligned rows of balconies project here and there into the slightly overcast sky. According to a rigorous utilitarian choreography building volumes are geometrically arranged. Strings of action rebel against the rigid grain of everyday banality and exhaust themselves. An absence unfolds amidst orchestrated repetition and isolation, as if reality was to congeal in abstract shapes yet unable to fully materialize. Individual ways of living are hidden behind standardized facades, which evenhandedly bear traces of attempted appropriation and of insuperable alienation.

“‘Yes write about it if I like or anything if I like but not there, there is no there there.’”

Gertrude Stein, Everybody’s Autobiography

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Project by Michael Hirschbichler
The work there is no there there presents an inventory of typical architectural fragments taken from existing situations in European urban agglomerations. These omnipresent fragments of ordinariness are captured through the media of photography, of architectural models, and of model photography. The standardized elements of suburban architecture exist somewhere between euphoric modernist visions and dispassionate functionality, between hope and weariness. These ordinary fragments, which are at the same time exchangeable and universal—like an exterior staircase, the front of a single-family house, a garage forecourt, an entrance, the façade of an office building etc.—become the focus of attention. As models of everyday banality they turn into instruments of investigation of basic principles, problems, and qualities of our built environment. Presented in such a way the banal gains significance, loses its ostensible implicitness, and reveals an ambiguity that is hidden behind its familiarity.

Between the different media an interplay unfolds. Photographs and models relate to reality in distinct ways. They also reveal diverse aspects of reality in varied degrees of abstraction. Photographs of existing situations form the basis for model fragments. These models are then themselves photographed and through this process two versions of reality are juxtaposed against one another. Insights can be gained by comparing the different media and by realizing the similarities they reveal. A strange closeness seems to form between abstract models and built reality, which raises questions about the nature and quality of that reality. Do we live in models, in mere abstractions? What is the role of the typical and standardized for our contemporary environment? To what extent are our everyday surroundings more than an absurd encounter of standardized fragments? Is specificity nothing more than the ruptures occurring in a field of homogeneity? And can unique moments be provoked through juxtapositions of ordinary fragments? The statement there is no there there indicates a suspicion that something we believe to exist behind eagerly repeated gridded facades, amidst tightly woven networks of standardization and beyond the smooth surfaces of functional optimization is actually missing.


All Images: There is No There There © Michael Hirschbichler
There is No There There
There is No There There
There is No There There
There is No There There
There is No There There
There is No There There
There is No There There
There is No There There
“Folk Art” is the catch-all name given to the creative endeavors of ordinary people. From shop signs to ship’s figureheads to hand-embroidered quilts and samplers, these objects are sometimes a little shonky but always caringly crafted and often exquisitely made. Using an economy of means and made from materials to hand they are symbols of local traditions, family narratives, and individual obsessions.

This type of work by untrained artists and unskilled craftspeople is in turn periodically disregarded and celebrated by our cultural institutions. When the Royal Academy was established in 1769, it explicitly excluded anything remotely folk-ish ruling that “no needlework, artificial flowers, cut paper, shell work, or any such baubles should be admitted.”

Distinctions between high and low art have become somewhat more blurred since, everyday objects having enjoyed a kind of parallel existence as rarified exhibits in the gallery since at least Duchamp’s urinal. This summer, for instance, the Tate held an exhibition of folk art, and the British Council now host a virtual Folk Archive collection which includes contemporary items such as homemade costumes for carnivals and placards for protests and pop concerts.

When displayed in the gallery though, folk objects change their meaning. We approach them in a different way. The direct meanings they often carry are replaced by more ambiguous aesthetic meanings. Architecture though is experienced, for the most part, within the context of the everyday. Buildings almost always retain their basic use value, their most prosaic requirements, even considered to be high culture.

There’s Nowt So Ordinary As Folk

Short essay by Ordinary Architecture (Elly Ward and Charles Holland)
So what would constitute a folk architecture? We might, for instance, think of painted gypsy caravans and canal narrow boats or wooden Russian orthodox churches, or of “outsider” constructions such as Watt's Towers in Los Angeles. Another kind of folk-architecture can be found in DIY culture and the history of self-build developments such as plotland housing.

The history of housing is as much a history of folk adaptations as it is of original architectural intent. Doors, windows, and their frames are decorated or replaced by residents, original brickwork painted or concealed behind half timbering or stone cladding to reflect individual tastes and aspirations. From a porch to a full-blown castellated construction, this form of expression is often deeply intimate and laden with personal significance.

Folk architecture raises obvious issues of authorship and legitimization. Unlike art, not everyone can be an architect. It is a term protected in law. Outsider, ordinary, or folk architecture will always be marginalized by the profession because it is produced for the most part beyond the profession's gaze. It is the product of people making architecture who aren't actually architects.

How as an architect can one approach positively the idea of ordinary architecture? Can an interest in the everyday qualities of folk architecture move beyond tokenism? Can buildings exist in both the world of “high” architecture and ordinary popular meaning? Is it possible to learn from these things without losing the qualities in them that resist architecture’s urge towards tasteful restraint and aesthetic neatness?
Not much modern architecture by architects is generally referred to as ordinary in a complimentary way, although some have occasionally used it to describe a set of values. But the ordinary art and architecture created by those outside of these institutions is rich with meaning and significance in a much more important way. It contains meanings and qualities that resist architecture’s tendency towards abstract value. And it is often full of extra-ordinary delights.

These illustrations form part of a series of both observed and exaggerated real-life resident adaptations to terraced houses in Netherfield, a modernist housing estate in Milton Keynes, UK designed by Dixon Jones in 1971.

All illustrations by Ordinary Architecture

1 “British Folk Art” (quoted in exhibition, Tate Britain, June 10 - August 31, 2014).
The southbound drive from Chicago to Champaign along I–57 is a drowsy 140-mile procession of silvery grey road and neatly arrayed corn and soy fields dotted by barns and farmhouses set beneath a vast midwestern sky. Just past the halfway point, once you have given in to the landscape’s persistent rhythm, one might notice a foreign silhouette along the train tracks inlaid against the horizon. Just outside of Gilman, Illinois, but far enough to evade any landmarks that may announce its presence, this concrete construct changes its profile repeatedly—alternating between one massive object and two autonomous shapes.

This enigmatic coaling tower typology has lost its utility and relevance as the collective understanding of early twentieth-century culture has too begun to fade. Born of a calculated logic to serve society and industry by fueling steam engines, these structures are now considered novelties: the site of choice for rebellious teenage hangouts, photo opportunities for rail road enthusiasts, and motorists’ topics of conversation speculating on what exactly they did. With their steel chutes, walkways, and control booths long scrapped, the raw shells of form have been disassociated from their function, further mystifying the diverse formal language once so ubiquitous.
During their heyday, coaling towers fulfilled the role of a fundamentally simple storage vessel for coal. Coal would be loaded into the elevated storage tower by an attached conveyor mechanism and subsequently dispensed by chutes into the locomotive’s coal-car, or tender. The coaling tower’s sloped chutes located adjacent to—or at times straddling—the rails permitted traffic flow while servicing parked trains, preventing congestion at the station ahead. Following these basic guidelines, each tower personifies its pragmatism unencumbered by the abstract rules of symmetry or proportion.

Coaling towers depict what happens when the ordinary reluctantly, and despite itself, loses its timeliness. Vying for relevance, ordinary, unlike its often-misread cousin typical, is charged with the context of its locality and characteristics of its function. It is common but not generic, and thus leaves itself in a vulnerable position as aspects that form its very identity begin to change along with society, leaving it meaningless.

Yet, the undeniably anthropomorphic character these constructs exude, deceives the hidden value of these relics to remind us of the impact specificity has on marking the overarching transience of culture. They are an example of the ease with which our mannersisms and typological shorthand can fall victim to time’s ability to dissipate the presumed rationality of the customs and rituals of our everyday lives.

Coaling towers provide a moment of pause for us to question our fixations and at the same time create previously unforeseen relationships with the contexts they find themselves in, counteracting the ever-increasing vagueness of our built environment and material culture. It is this new status of novelty that frees coaling towers from their past lives of servitude as we project upon them our own interpretations of what we see before us.
The Veneer of Nostalgia: Dingbat Life in *Slums of Beverly Hills*

Essay by Joshua G. Stein

Casa Bella. Another dingbat. Dingbats...that’s what they’re called. Two-story apartment buildings featuring cheap rent and fancy names that promise the good life, but never deliver.

Vivian Abramowitz, *Slums of Beverly Hills*

Those dingbats are so poignant. So beautiful and heart-breaking. Little temporary homes for the underclass like tenements with fanciful aspirational names extravagantly drawn on the front like hotels. They break my heart, those buildings.

Tamara Jenkins, writer/director of *Slums of Beverly Hills*

Parallel Trajectories

The domestic landscape of Tamara Jenkins’ 1998 film *Slums of Beverly Hills* feels ambivalently familiar to anyone who has called the flatlands of Southern California home. A semi-autobiographical coming-of-age story, the film chronicles the awkward family life of fifteen-year-old Vivian Abramowitz. The self-conscious sequence of uncomfortable encounters and spaces constructed by writer/director Jenkins offers a potential parallel trajectory of aspiration and aimless displacement between the fictional past of the Abramowitz family and a larger cultural present shared by hundreds of thousands (perhaps millions) across the Southland.

A soundless and familiar pall falls over the family as the car continues to coast through Beverly Hills. The Abramowitzes are on the skids again--forever circling the margins of affluence and staving off economic disaster.

Driven by the desire to live within the Beverly Hills school district, Vivian’s divorced aging father drags his family from one low-rent apartment to the next. The film plays on a nostalgia for days of innocence as well as a nostalgia for a particular patina of Southern California lifestyle. As a period piece, it expressively depicts one specific reality within 1976 Los Angeles. Poignantly, this existence is every bit as present in the contemporary city of L.A. as well. Cheap rent, faux luxe, attenuated provisionality, financial purgatory: dingbat life.

With half of the movie occurring in one apartment space or another, what is particularly significant about this depiction of an Angeleno’s adolescence is its conscious use of the dingbat as both iconic symbol and experiential lived space. The Abramowitzes’ fictional story reveals the reality...
Early in the film, in the middle of the night, Murray Abramowitz wakes his two teen children, Ben and Vivian, and their younger brother, Rickey. They resume what seems to be a regular ritual—fleeing one dingbat for another while evading payment of the last month’s rent. After escaping the landlord of The Beverly Capri, we see them continue on to Casa Bella, then to The Camelot and then on to unnamed future dingbats. In a chutes and ladders game of social climbing, the Abramowitzes’ trajectory is one more of spatial displacement than social mobility, despite momentary glimpses of the good life.

Along the way, Vivian’s life plays out across the spaces of the dingbat; her first sexual experience with Eliot, the young pot dealer from next door; her reckoning with her own body image through bathroom conversations with her cousin Rita and laundry room encounters with pre-teen cosmetic surgery victims; and her growing awareness of class issues discussed frankly on the living room floor—her father on a recliner, the kids with pizza in hand in front of the TV.

The awkwardness of Vivian’s family life is echoed and perfectly rendered in the clumsy social interactions created by the dingbat. As the Abramowitzes move into their “new” apartment in the Casa Bella, Vivian walks past a neighbor/stranger eating a bowl of cereal who looks right through her. Separated only by a layer of glass, the uncomfortable lack of privacy is palpable, the directionality of voyeurism unclear, leaving both parties feeling equally out of place. This uneasy social choreography is created by the exterior walkways that many dingbat apartments employ to access upper-level units. What seem like generous openings to the outside are in reality windows into public circulation spaces, forcing the inhabitants to choose between light and privacy. Jenkins’ humorous settings deftly reveal the character of life within the dingbat, where meager attempts at the California good life seem self-consciously languid—shared space rarely feeling social, the relationship with nature hardly natural.
The dingbat's clumsy relationships between the spaces of circulation and inhabitation create a mutual unease in both common and private spaces. © 20th Century Fox

CUT TO:
A small hand lovingly strokes thick new carpet.

RICKEY (OS)
It's plush!

INT. CAMELOT APTS – NEW APARTMENT – DAY
Rickey, splayed out on the floor rubs the wall to wall rust shag carpeting. Murray and Ben mill around the new spread. It's sunny and filled with bad hotel-like furniture.

Vivian enters with her box. Eliot right behind her.

RICKEY
Look Viv. Feel it.

VIVIAN
Wow. It's furnished!

BEN
(standing by dinette set)
Check out the Formica

ELIOT
Big step up from Casa Bella

Halfway through the film, the arrival of rehab-escapee cousin Rita, followed by her father’s support checks, allows the family to upgrade from the Casa Bella to The Camelot, the “deluxe” apartment complex across the street. This larger structure is a derivative of an innovation in the dingbat typology profiting from two adjacent lots: a “double-wide” dingbat constructed as two mirrored and conjoined twins with underground parking and a unifying façade. The new common space created between the two wings offers room for added amenities—elevators, lobby, interior hallways, and a pool. However, in the film, the barely perceptible differences between the spaces of The Camelot and the Casa Bella only highlight the tenacious qualities of dingbat life, the hierarchy of socio-economic strata within this world rendering its defining characteristics all the more palpable.

Commonplace Quirky
While the Beverly Hillbillies were exceptional outsiders, the characters in Slums are commonplace—the true stuff of the city. The dingbat represents their specific anyplace, While its formula is generic, it is the exact condition of genericity that is quintessentially L.A., a city defined by the post-war obsession with mass-produced consumer commodities, including the home. The quirkiness of the narrative of Slums seems eccentric only in its specifics, while still representing a larger set of “atypical” living patterns that feel completely at home within the dingbat and within L.A.

RICKEY
Maybe in Torrance we could afford other stuff like furniture

MURRAY
(snapping awake)
Goddamn it! We're stayin' here for the school district. Furniture is temporary. Education is forever. Forget the furniture. Forget Torrance!

The Abramowitz family structure depicted by Jenkins directly parallels the new normal of the inhabitants of the contemporary dingbat and the larger city of Los Angeles. Explicitly shedding the trappings of a traditional nuclear family, Slums instead depicts a single-parent family. A divorced father of three with a long-term visiting relative stands in for the many various contemporary cohabitation structures—a creativity born of necessity. The Abramowitzes’ nomadic lifestyle reveals an ambition—or at least a restlessness—to better one’s lot. Justifying the constant uprooting of his family, Murray explains, “Furniture is temporary, education is forever.” However, despite this drive for the self-betterment of his family, the film points
more towards a downward trajectory, a steady decline from the higher ground of middle-class standing. While Murray once owned a family home and business, divorce disrupted this stability, pushing this restructured family into its current state of drift. Their story makes apparent the fact that while the dingbat may have been originally popularized to house aspiring transplants arriving from the Midwest, by the ‘70s it had already become the barracks for the upwardly ambitious yet laterally mobile.

This view of Los Angeles through the lens of Jenkins’ narrative is a productive, if pessimistic, update to popular Hollywood stereotypes. In theater and film, the brownstones of Brooklyn or the duplexes of the Bronx have emerged as the flip-side to Manhattan’s skyscrapers. But while so much of New York’s screen persona is defined by childhood tales from the boroughs, L.A.’s depiction in the media is often glamorized or downplayed, either embodying the glitz of Hollywood or standing in for any city or suburb in the country. *Slums*, however, offers a Los Angeles corollary to New York’s double image, replacing skyscraper/brownstone with beach/dingbat or Hollywood/dingbat. In other words, the dingbat represents the space of the everyday, the every Angeleno. This dingbat is tenement housing with a happy face, where the ghettoized squalor of nineteenth-century New York is replaced by the global itinerancy of post-Fordist Los Angeles.

**Anachronistic Veneer of Nostalgia**

While the Spanish colonial architecture of film noir or the green lawns and sprinklers of the suburbs are the dominant establishing scenes of the ‘40s and ‘50s and ‘50s to ‘80s respectively, Jenkins’ displaced ‘60s dingbat aesthetic seems oddly appropriate for millennial Los Angeles. More than a simple retro aesthetic, this patina of the passé that coats all surfaces of *Slums* seems an all-too-accurate depiction of a large portion of the present housing stock of Los Angeles. These structures were built on the cheap with materials and finishes that were never intended for any real longevity. In *Slums*, which is set in 1976, the apartment aesthetic already feels dated, expressing the plight of a family that can only afford an aesthetic/lifestyle already ten to fifteen years old.

Perhaps the anachronism of the ‘60s veneer creates a certain discomfort that is essential to the yearning to move upward—or at least move on. The temporary feeling of living in another time, living outside of one’s own aesthetic, makes it clear that there must be something better, or at least something more “current” to come in the near future.

This dingbat life is also crassly democratic—equally (un)comfortable for immigrants from Latin America as for those from elsewhere in the United States, each looking to L.A. for a new definition of prosperity or success. Upon first arriving to this new set of opportunities, maybe there is something reassuring about assuming the life of some anonymous tenant of the past—like buying random family photos at the flea market. After all, the West has always been the place to redefine oneself.

The cheapness of it all also somehow seems to offer room for improvement, both individually and collectively. Los Angeles is a place of ambition and self-betterment while remaining a city continually poised to blossom. “Forever circling the margins of affluence” seems to aptly describe and bind together a population more united by a patient search or wait than any demographic alignment. Perhaps this ethos is best summed up in the Spanish *esperanza*, translating as a conflation of both waiting and hoping. No longer a city of Middle America’s American Dream, L.A. is now a landscape of aggregate micro realities—half fulfilled hopes suspended in a sunny and sweet smog of “getting by.”

The dingbat is the architectural embodiment of this condition, a stucco veneer of anticipation propped up by the stick wood framing of earnest provisionality, simultaneously hopeful for the future and resigned to its position in the present. And perhaps within this deceit lies the larger charm of L.A.—it always seems surprisingly normal and livable, despite the gap between the reality of dingbat life and the anticipation of streets paved in gold, parties attended by stars and starlets, economic liberation, and professional success. Los Angeles—for the moment—is not such a bad place to live.

1 Email correspondence with LA Forum regarding the Dingbat 2.0 Competition, June 16, 2010.

Blue text reflects portions of the *Slums of Beverly Hills* movie script.
The velocity of events, in which meetings with clients and engineers, construction site visits, phone calls, emails, and multiple travels pile up appear to dilute the essence of the creative work in ordinary quotidian proceedings. At what moment does an idea appear? How does a project materialize or translate into space? It seems like the former could never happen let alone the later. The daily flow keeps presenting unexpected events that shape the working hours; the intense exchange of ideas with diverse stakeholders and, mainly, the multitude of situations that arise, force an invisible but constant reflection, a state of active awareness similar to that demanded when you are in a city foreign to you. Sometimes we are forced by the context to focus our attention on the immediate and our thinking to be reactive. Maybe we could counteract the uncertainty of everyday events if we accept that constant flow and simultaneous evolution are the essence of contemporary context. A context that we are incapable of containing in set definitions or categories, one in which we are witnesses and participants, in which we are wanderers through a dynamic and constantly flowing condition. We counteract by facing this context without the urge to categorize but with the intention to transform to the best of our ability and within our scope the scenarios of space production.
At Rojkind Arquitectos, creative work is directed towards focusing different viewpoints to maximize project potential. We are not only interested in the rationalism needed to make purely design decisions but we are also interested in enhancing architectural programs and translating those into a space that will—beyond a formal language—allow unexpected relationships between activities.

At Cineteca Nacional (National Film Archives and Film Institute of Mexico) the space became more than a place for cinema. It became a public space for diverse activities that have nothing to do with attending movie screenings and is enjoyed by a large variety of users. Doctors and nurses from a nearby hospital gather there to eat their home-brought lunches, elderly use it as an outdoor reading room, teenagers as a dating spot, thousands use it as a preferred shortcut to the nearby metro station, and the people that fill the coffee shops have adopted the space as an extension of their neighborhood.

Daily evolution and responses to the unexpected seem to be at the core of our creative work where the challenge is to translate what the client wants into what many others might enjoy. Our ability to react by linking things, ideas, and stakeholders has become the motor of our office. At first glance these links might seem fortuitous: a client hired us to design a supermarket store and we proposed to include local producers, informal merchants, and companies dedicated to urban farming going beyond his original vision; another client hired us to design a hotel and we found a way to include the collaboration of black clay artisans and plastic industrials and even going into small details like designing the room keys. This is because we perceive the need to include a multitude of players so we are more prepared and can better react to the vortex of the quotidian and the constant flow of unfiltered information in our contemporary context.

The ideas that appeared daily and apparently without much planning were, in the beginning, reactions directed to face surprising conditions. Now our reactions are manifested through links between technologies, interests, professions, people, and identities. These links produce new ones, triggering collaborative processes that take a life of their own.

Take for example the case of Mercado Roma. While developing this project we found a multitude of collaboration opportunities that went beyond the scope of the architecture and into the world of gastronomy. The project became primarily a communication platform between different players that became involved in the project, who in turn invited other players to join.

The platform strategy eventually gathered 55 vendors from an emerging Mexican gastronomic generation that now operate in a space defined by their synergy. Customers find a diverse offering of gourmet options in different price ranges concentrated in one space. Local production is harnessed by many, and each vendor is able to reduce its maintenance and operations costs benefiting from each other.

Even though design strategies and architectural program conceptualizations have been the key to our architectural expression, a lot of our energy is spent trying to figure out a way of getting the projects built, understanding our local constraints, coming up with technical solutions, meeting realistic building schedules and respecting the clients budgets. In the end something extraordinary is the result of daily ordinary work.

For this piece we chose to study daily life in two of our projects: Cineteca Nacional and Mercado Roma. Cineteca Nacional was selected because it is a public project open to all kind of visitors, and to every possible critic, not just from an architectural view, but also from a political standpoint. Mercado Roma was chosen because it is a place where we can explore how architecture can be shaped from a transversal and participatory project, one in which we were able to reinforce the idea of sharing risks and values. We adapted George Perec’s text “The Street” from his book *Species of Spaces*, in which he proposes a method for understanding the street through meticulous and objective observation. We interpreted Perec’s work as a set of instructions, which anyone—including those not trained as architects—can use to describe architectural spaces and the activities that occur therein. Elena Muñoz, a communications professional, applied Perec’s guidelines to describe quotidian life in these spaces. Here are the results:
To arrive to the Cineteca Nacional by metro is a complete delight. One gets to walk down a quiet street (with luck a fair or a market will be taking place) and next to a city cemetery before arriving at the Cineteca Nacional. Just outside, in front of the entrance, a piracy stall offers art movies. Passing through the entrance a wide-open space appears: the projection space, where free presentations take place all year long.

Next to the open projection space another garden spreads out. The two spaces are full of people lying, sitting on the floor on blankets and petates (mats), which are offered in the Cineteca. A wide corridor divides the two spaces flanked by coffee shops, little restaurants, and a bookstore. The space is wide and open; lots of people are sitting in the gardens, chatting, bicycling, and walking around. Over their heads, a white triangle-perforated structure raises and constitutes the façade.

On the second floor, one can find a dark-toned space where the screening rooms are and in the center a curvilinear bar hosts a Roxy Ice Cream shop.

There are more than 40 people on petates all around the floor. There is one coffee shop in the old building and some other, several, in the new one. Two or three of the coffee shops were already here before the space was renovated. Although each one of them is independent from the others, if one is to stand in the middle of the corridor with coffee shops and restaurants to each side, one gets the feeling that every establishment is a part of each other.

The best way to observe the general panorama of the Cineteca is walking around from one place to another, or staying short periods of time in strategic spots: the first bench with a view to the gardens and parking lot, the terrace with a view to the ticket office, other gardens, the new screening rooms, the ice cream shop, the coffee shops, the restaurants, or the back gardens from where you can observe the amphitheater.

This is why anybody who has a real interest in observing what happens in the Cineteca cannot leave without walking through the outdoor screening room, the terrace, and all of the gardens.

The next day, I arrive by car. I am surprised to see the parking lot as the main façade. It fits the context, though. If one comes by car, it is easy to notice the amount of parking lots, old factories, and sober structures next to the Cineteca.

But I raise my hopes as I see that this space functions as a park, as a public space, as a gathering site for several diversities. Kids run and shout to the open space, and elderly people smile in front of a couple smoking pot while some young couples at the open-air screening space touch and kiss without critical gazes. I listen to no sound but the sound of society; crossing and arguing, talking, and going back and forth, within a freedom of space, in this city where prejudice domains, and violent conditions hold back the most simple and ordinary behaviors. Surely, unexpected amounts of visitors come here not just to the movies, but just to let go.
Mercado Roma, Friday June 13th

Founded in 1880, the Colonia Roma is one of the modern neighborhoods reborn from the 1985 earthquake. A mixed-use vibrant and young neighborhood, Colonia Roma is constantly visited by locals and tourists both for business and recreation. In particular, Queretaro Street is located next to two important and busy streets that somehow break the borough dynamic of this site. At the same time, this location extraordinarily centralizes and creates a close relationship with both Condesa and Roma neighborhoods, connecting all their restaurants, bars, offices, galleries, and cultural centers to Mercado Roma.

I know we have arrived to Mercado Roma as the benches on the sidewalk look different than those traditional steel benches. We walk into a black and orange space. Geometric islands define the different stands, islands made from black steel, orange acrylic, some glass, and little or no wood. Wide black columns emerge from the ground and go up two stories above our heads. Next to some of the columns and on top of some of the bars, glass windows display gourmet products.

We move to the back area, long tables are arranged so that people who don’t want to sit on the bars can rather sit on benches and chairs. Outside there is a terrace with an orchard that also serves as a dining room.

People promenade from every side; they come in, go out, traverse, and go up or down the stairs. Waiters, waitresses, cooks, and clients move out and in of the stands. The corridors are full of people who look inside of every stand. Upstairs, the restrooms display a fun combination of colors and mirrors. Most of the people working inside these places are dressed in black or black and white stripes. I notice four legs of Spanish ham hanging near the market’s entrance and, at the same moment, a long and loud whistle can be heard from far away.

There are almost no children. People are well dressed in the early afternoon but, as the day goes by, more diverse people start to walk around. Although there are many people sitting alone, most of the clients and shoppers are gathered in small groups or couples.

Cumbia songs are playing all the time, I look up and see a sign Villa de Patos (Duck Village) and, although I can hear the sound of moving coins, there is no sound of cash registers.

At first I can hear the sound of plates crashing against each other, glass, voices, and some occasional paper wrapping or unwrapping something. Several sinks inside the stands reveal the sound of water running. Suddenly, a little boy screams. At the same time, the man standing across the bar also screams with joy of running into a friend. Another leading sound is that of dragging the stools around and dropping bottle caps on the floor.

I am surprised of the lack of odors. For being a Mexican market, no raw food, meat, or fish can be smelled. The only detectable smell is that of the stand that sells cheese behind us.

A cumbia song takes Mercado Roma at large, I can hear—suave, suave, suavecito. People wander through the space; a social mixture blurs the place at large. Everybody takes it easy and, like the song, this place fits into the city in a soft way. It seems to me that this place has been here for years, although it has been open only a few weeks.

It is practically impossible to contain compl-exities. But in cities such as Mexico City, emergent conditions are a common basis, they become the ordinary, and we are trained tactically to react. If you design spaces for “other things to happen,” they will. They will be used and occupied by people in ways we don’t expect. We believe that is the biggest compliment for any architecture.
Zen training is almost entirely gradual and slow, punctuated by rare flashes of illumination, in spite of Zen being known as the "sudden school." The real gift of Zen is gratitude for the ordinary. As Master Unmon (864-949) said: "It might even be better never to have known the best things."

Zen is not so interested in the special. It’s unimpressed by miracles. An old master once met a miracle-worker who walked on water for him. He shrugged his shoulders and said, “For me the miracle is walking on the ground.”

The practitioner known as Layman Pang, who lived in ninth-century China, said: my miracles are drawing water and carrying wood.

In Zen, making a cup of tea, fetching milk from the fridge, standing outside on the front step looking at the remains of a storm drift across the dawn sky, hearing the drip-drip of rainwater into a puddle from the roof, are all miracles. The miraculous, in the end, is the fact of anything existing at all.

If Zen had a purpose it might be just to see this moment as it is, in the fullness of its creation. Zen is the opposite of withdrawal from the world. It is a radical acceptance of what life offers, the pain and suffering no less than the dawn skies, the sea in rain, the mountain dark under morning clouds, and the shopping list.
A farmer came to Buddha complaining of his many problems.

"My children don’t respect me, the harvest was awful, my farm-workers are lazy, my wife despises me—"

Buddha interrupted:

"I’m sorry, I can’t help you."

The farmer was shocked.

"The great teacher, and you can’t help?"

"No. You have 83 problems."

"I do?"

"Yes. Everyone has 83 problems. I can do nothing for you."

"So what good is your teaching?"

"Well, you have an 84th problem too, and that I can help you with."

"What is it?"

"That you don’t want any problems."

Zen does not have a purpose. But one of its purposeless fruits is appreciation for our lives just as they are. It’s all fleeting.

The Diamond Sutra says: “You should see all this fleeting world as a bubble on a stream, a flicker of lightning in a summer cloud, a phantom, a dream.” The universe may have another dozen billion years: one blink in the time-scale of Zen. Not just the earth under our feet, not just all our friends and family, but all the stars and gas clouds and wandering comets and planets fertile and infertile of the 300 billion galaxies—all will be gone. What kind of attitude other than appreciation could possibly be right, Zen asks.

Who needs anything more than the ordinary?

Dogen (1200-1253) said: “To what shall I liken this world? To moonlight reflected in dewdrops shaken from a crane’s bill.”

The vastness of space no bigger than a dewdrop, the earth itself no more substantial than a gleam of moonlight: that’s the ordinary, right here, right now.
Commercial Strip Tease

Essay by David Karle
The strip mall experience has been augmented based on consumer behavior, shifting demographics, high-priced gas, and Internet shopping, making strip malls architectural relics. The strip mall typology is poised to be reimagined within this changing consumer behavior. The mindless replication of internal spaces within the strip mall generates a condition more concerned with the bottom line than the space or environment the setting creates. Although this building type and its internal spaces may be defaults, they are sophisticated in execution and deployment. They operate at a high level of efficiency and in some cases are unable to evolve. This essay explores opportunities to alter roofing components to generate new spatial arrangements without disrupting the efficiency of the strip mall in its construction or in consumer habits.

The infinite horizon of the North American landscape that inspired Frank Lloyd Wright’s Prairie style house in the early 1900s also produced the architecture typology of maximum visible exposure—the strip mall. According to Robert Venturi, strip malls aren’t bad—they’re just honest. The strip mall is a product of its environment. The thin façade of these pre-engineered buildings are fast, quick, thin, and cheap to produce. They mimic the smooth straight lines of the road and the infinite horizon in the distance. The architectural shed as described by Venturi falls away and becomes the backdrop to the shifting cultural condition of the automobile. The simple strip mall shed addresses the street head-on and the only requirements are an overindulgent sign, a large expansive roof, and a parking lot. What if these three elements were altered in anticipation of repopulating suburbia? Scholars such as Charles Waldheim, Chair of Landscape Architecture Department at Harvard’s Graduate School of Design, claim that low-scale and low-density development will infill the outlying areas of North American cities, and Ellen Dunham-Jones, of Georgia Institute of Technology, states that, as we continue to grow and shift, the big design and development project for the next fifty years will be retrofitting suburbia.

In anticipation of this low-scale building density in suburban areas we must begin to look at these suburban artifacts in new ways. The role of the parking lot is consequently still a necessary part of the suburban auto-centric network. Second in square feet to the parking lot is the flat roof. This architectural element has suffered significantly in the last few decades,
becoming a victim to the introduction of air-conditioning, mandated codes, and environmental insulation requirements. However, the strip mall roof is large and free to grow endlessly due to air-conditioning technologies. The overall scale of the strip mall varies, but the roof often is greater than all the microclimates of interior space. In Rem Koolhaas’s 2002 essay *Junkspace*, he states, “we have built more than all previous generations put together.” Koolhaas claims that the air-conditioning unit has launched the endless building that includes the strip mall, big box stores, large shopping malls, and casinos, all of which contain consumer-based activities. If the roof were freed of air-conditioning units, what new role or activity could it take on?

The role of the roof within architecture has been widely investigated and discussed. From the ancient tent structures to contemporary examples, the roof has been treated as a malleable surface able to adapt to multiple parameters and influences. This architectural element is often the largest single surface in buildings, especially the large flat roofs seen throughout North America. Flat roof construction has infiltrated and populated suburban communities through commercial architectural typologies. The modularity of a pre-engineered building optimizes material and construction technology but often with a harsh separation between inside and outside space.

The roof was a way of thinking about climate, weather, and materiality as well as expressing a cultural identity. In the eighteenth century, the pitched roof had an environmental function. The roof was built-up with thick, heavy material and pitched to shed rain and snow. The attic space once was used as storage, then as servant quarters. After the roof was insulated and the attic space was comfortable, the space became desirable. This added an economic element to the roof. In the nineteenth century, the long-span, light roof emerged as the driving form and construction typology referencing the era of factories, train stations, bazaars, arcades, and market halls. These building typologies coupled with the long-span roof made a combination of lightness, thinness, and porosity possible. The flat roof, as expressed by Le Corbusier’s 1914 Domino House, had a formal function that allowed for flexible distribution of structure, walls, facade, and roof. The Domino House was the Model-T of homes, envisioned for mass production.
and uniformity. But, should a house or a roof be mass-produced like an automobile? The standardization of houses and roof elements arguably can be traced back to the standardization methods throughout American history, from the Jeffersonian grid and lumber sizes to 4'-0" x 8'-0" sheet material and Sears, Roebuck and Company mail-order homes. These options simplified and constructed the roof as an impenetrable datum and completely disregarded the roof’s relationship to the interior. Provided this brief history of roofs, it is ironic today the most common function of flat roofs has been passive storage of mechanical units.

With an increase in knowledge, and a nod towards environmental awareness, suburban malls and strip malls are reducing their dependence on air-conditioning. If malls reduce their dependence on air-conditioning, freeing up two-thirds of roof space currently occupied by machinery, they can explore new forms and functions. If liberated from air-conditioning machines, what other forms and functions could the roof provide? As architects and designers we need to re-examine this formerly forgotten territory in order to maximize function and habitation. The horizontal datum of the mall roof provides multiple functions. The roof is a continuous barrier against moisture and enables tenant space to expand and contract with minimal or no repercussions to the outside envelope, but it is also a barrier against light and sectional space. The depth of the strip mall roof has been cost-effectively optimized to meet code and material constraints. The thinness in the strip mall roof is one of hyper efficiency, developer driven economic reasoning, and a maximization of materials, but the roof still could be conceptually and physically thinner. By delaminating the layers of the roof and proposing new, thinner materials the space within the strip mall can be reimagined. Through the past few decades a default attitude has been applied towards roofs. The quality of space within a strip mall is generically standard except for one relationship, the storefront window. This inside-outside threshold is blurred in hopes of maximizing retail sales. The window enables the consumer to view the merchandise in the store. Can the roof be considered the same way? Altering the roof would not increase merchandise visibility but it would provide the consumer with a different retail experience. By engaging the dormant roof-scape of the strip mall a new space and new experience within suburbia would emerge, similar to the bazaars and arcades of past years.


Domestic Hats
Installation by Jennifer Bonner

Domestic Hats is an installation by Jennifer Bonner that explores ordinary roof typologies and rethinks the role of the massing model in architectural representation.

A quick drive around neighborhoods such as Peachtree Hills, Cabbagetown, and Midtown demonstrate stylistic differences in the domestic architecture of Atlanta. Arguably the single most common element of these houses is the roof. Whether located in English Avenue, Old Fourth Ward, or Ansley Park, shared rooflines crisscross neighborhood boundaries. Ordinary and simplistic, yet highly repetitive, gable and hip roofs dominate the scene while butterfly and mansard roofs represent a rarer species. Dormers, A-frame, and shed roofs are combined to make a complex system of functional rooftops with countless variations. These copy-paste forms not only populate the housing stock, but represent house figures and house shapes widely accepted by the public.

But what happens if the conventions of roof typologies become distorted? What if the overly complex roofs seen in Buckhead are celebrated and further exaggerated? By focusing on the intersection of non-similar roofs—rooflines that just don’t belong—foreign types are discovered by deploying a series of Boolean operations. Originals are copied and hybrid forms are manipulated to create sixteen unique massing models. Domestic Hats calls for architects to consider misbehavior in the architecture, particularly at the roofline.

Massing models are usually small in size and the result of a quick, iterative design process by the architect. They represent the schema, the diagram, or a proto-architecture. Lacking detail and often made out of a singular material, massing models distinguish differences in a volumetric study—“slightly thinner”, “no, a little longer”, or better yet, “let’s make it fatter.” Domestic Hats delights in these tendencies to engage multiples, but rejects the constraint of smallness. For these purposes, the massing models are scaled up to an awkward size, they are not easily transportable, and they don’t quite fit in the frame of our foam wire cutter. The massing models to be included in the installation are not large enough to be considered a pavilion, nor do they sit comfortably on a client’s conference room table. Intentionally inflated, these massing models merely represent themselves. No longer a representational stand-in for something else, they reveal new hats for consideration in domestic architecture.
Domestic Hats

![Diagram of Domestic Hats]

- Stretched Gables with Intersection Volumes
  - 79 Fitzgerald Street SE

- Two Sets of Incrementally Scaled Gables with Colliding Geometries
  - 169 Sampson Street NE

- Gable Roofs with Lifted Ridge Lines
  - 934 Berkshire Road NE

- Hips, Gables, Dormers, A-frames, Sheds, and Mansards Combined and Viewed in Six Parts
  - 11 Beverly Road NE

- Radial Hip Roofs with Minimum and Maximum Ridge Lines
  - 66 Moreland Avenue NE

- Stretched Hip Roofs with Piggyback Volumes
  - 818 Verner Street NW

- Flattened Hip Roofs with Common Seams and Low Profiles
  - 1072 Center Street NW

- Traditional Face with Elongated and Stretched Hip Roofs
  - 3200 W Paces Park Drive NW

- Stretched Gables with Intersection Volumes
  - 79 Fitzgerald Street SE

- Scaled, Chopped, Sliced, and Shuffled Gables turned Miniature A-frames
  - 95 Mayson Avenue NE

- Flipped Gable Volumes as Booleaned Butterfly Roofs
  - 272 Dodd Avenue SW

- Multiple Gable Roofs with Adjoining Dormers Realigned into One Singular Ridge Line
  - 836 Smith Street SW

- Hip Roofs with Oblique Cuts and Shifted Planes
  - 293 Connecticut Avenue NE

- Dramatic A-Frame Volumes Assembled with Stretched Hip Roofs
  - 755 Stokeswood Avenue SE

- Iconic Gable Face with Eleven Exploded Miniature Gables
  - 656 East Avenue NE

Domestic Hats drawings © Courtesy Studio Bonner
Domestic Hats models
© Courtesy Studio Bonner
Domestic Hats

models in front yards of Atlanta neighborhoods

© Caitlin Peterson
Domestic Hats models in front yards of Atlanta neighborhoods © Caitlin Peterson
Domestic Hats

models in front yards of Atlanta neighborhoods
© Caitlin Peterson
Domestic Hats

models in front yards of Atlanta neighborhoods
© Caitlin Peterson
Domestic Hats
installation at The Goat Farm Arts Center, Atlanta
© Patrick Heagney

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I started thinking that it’s almost like trying to gather important memories, that you have to look for memories in something like gravel, something so indistinct from far away and so varied up close that it’ll make your head spin . . . that each part of the soul is made up of infinite parts, like shards of glass, like gravel, like the surface of the wall.

Giulio Mozzi, “Glass”

I have a fondness for alleys…an extension of an old love affair with post-industrial architecture and raw materials. I seek them out as palette cleansers, as places to exercise a sense of wonder in the anomalies to be found there. Alleys have stories to unearth and theories to project in mismatched brick infill and faded, phantom numbering; in metal bosses and escutcheons long since divorced from their structural burdens; in profiles of demolished chimneys and rooflines still telegraphing through mortar. What would normally be perceived as an ugliness that demands cosmetic concealment, remediation, or demolition in places of visual prominence, in alleys is left to languish (or thrive) in its own devices.
But beneath the layers of applied social and historical connotation, alleys contain a certain romance and mystery. Typically defined by the most unassuming façades of other built entities, they are the metaphorical vascular system of the urban body. They are both intentional and residual products—solids and voids—formed by nature of their functions, yet not always in adherence to a defined system. They are seen as commonplace, if seen at all.

Alleys, however, have two modes. Passively, they garner an ambivalent reaction, and we are content to accept them as a measure of normalcy. In this, alleys are tantamount to ordinary. But when we actually pass through them, and are thus actively confronted, our suspicions are roused. We question what exists under the neutral façade. Ironically, the ordinary in alleys presents itself as liminal—both refuge and threat—when by definition it should be neither.

Alleys are intimately entwined with Chicago’s urban origins. They appear in the original 1830 plats as an eighteen-foot-wide corridor intended to provide all buildings with rear service access. Had the mandate been strictly executed and enforced, one could argue that alleys would have reflected an unsettling ordinariness more in alignment with the formal definition: identical, standardized arteries lacing through the center of each city block, running parallel to the main public thoroughfares of Chicago’s famed grid system. But as the city expanded, developers deviated from the standard. Areas to the south were erected rapidly and haphazardly to accommodate the growing working and immigrant communities (who often used the outdoor envelopes of alleys as public extensions of their own private spaces); this activity was paralleled, but far from mirrored, in the construction on the north side, where the affluent built their weekend homes without alleys in an effort to abolish any possibility of what was increasingly perceived as “alley culture.”

Thus, alleys in Chicago, as in most other cities, evolved organically: as a general product of function and construction, but with modulations in dimension, materiality, position, and construction, readily changed to suit the needs of its neighbors and occupants. Fluxing along their entire lengths, they cut a byzantine pattern in the city’s figure ground, contributing to its unmistakable appearance in plan without serving as the primary warp and weft of the fabric.

Variety of this nature does not necessarily disprove ordinariness. It does, however, suggest alleys are an embodiment of the statistical notion of ergodicity, which is appropriate given the term’s etymology: Greek words for “work path.” Ergodicity is used to describe systems that, when averaged along the course of their progression, yield a singular result. For example, in a “random walk” model, individuals may independently follow arbitrary routes through a fixed group of city blocks; they will inevitably hit every intersection and travel every street—it is only the duration of the process that varies. A random walk of alleys, spent gathering impressions of the surroundings, would for some quickly yield the whole—a closed loop of imagery that signifies “alley.” It is, however, a question of scale; in an ergodic model, parts should substantially exemplify the whole. In the case of alleys, a trick happens when we compare cross sections outside the continuity. Consumed in these smaller segments, they clearly show their intricacies and diversities to such a degree that it would be impossible for a single fragment to stand as representative.

One of the earliest uses of the term ordinary refers to heraldry. Ordinaries were both the geometric subdivisions in coats of arms and the fields of color to which they were applied; they were defined by a strict set of graphic guidelines, but ambiguous in their recognition as solid or void.

This gestalt nature is similarly manifested in alleys, as functional containers that register as voids in a Nolli map. In another fashion, they are generic spaces and semiotic signifiers of banality that are simultaneously a collection of disparate and perpetually changing elements assembled along a path. Considered in terms of platonic solids, alleys are composed of a ground plane, paved or raw, two open planes of the horizon, sky or ceiling plane, and two planes formed by the back facades of adjacent buildings. Each of these surfaces inherently possesses its own uniqueness, in independent and dynamic states of change. Those two lateral elements, made of infinite permutations of masonry, glass, and metal—and which in other configurations enclose churches, theaters, and monuments—do not predetermine its identity as a whole.
Elegant decay may not merit such dramatic description to some—and in honesty, this piece is not intended to proselytize the hidden virtues of all alleys—but it does advocate a sense of optimism, and encourages recognition of the latent potential in the everyday. We need baselines and backgrounds by which to gauge any condition, a sense for boredom to counterbalance and enhance appreciation for excitement. The very nature of any activity witnessed in an alley—where one does not expect to see anything—lends a sense of heightened drama. Certain media, and particularly film, masterfully captures the phenomenon of potency and extraordinary beauty in the seemingly ordinary and ritually overlooked. The lone, elderly figure that appears prominently but briefly in several of Krzysztof Kieślowski’s films is an acknowledgement of that ideal—and a challenge to consider why, in the midst of so much other beauty, this individual is also worth our attention.

And consider this: glamour in its modern manifestations is generally assigned to objects and places that are alluring, attractive, and special. Its secondary connotation is less positive; a permutation of Norse and Scottish words that tie it to illusion and obfuscation, spells of the eye meant to conceal true natures. In that vein, is it so difficult to see ordinary as glamour, and alleys as extraordinary? We would do well to keep ourselves open; there may be something truly remarkable lying in plain sight within the gravel and brick.

The gestalt modes co-exist, but the liminal nature of such duality is not without conflict. Like a camera lens flickering in and out of focus from background to foreground, our faculties of recognition oscillate between the two states to align with our mindset at the time. Do we first perceive the chaos and the visceral sensations, which coalesce into a singular and daunting urban nature, and balk? Or are we struck with the impression of starkness, which beckons us to look more closely, notice the idiosyncrasies and delve deeper?

Not subject to what David Leatherbarrow refers to as “architectural epiphanies” and “aesthetic obligations,” elevations that define alleys are unapologetically minimal, driven by the logics of construction, functionality, and economy. They lack the space and audience to justify a deliberately aesthetic countenance, and so have the freedom to merge or clash with their contexts. In modern construction, utilitarian materials are left raw, or detailed more simply, in an effort to limit expense, maintenance requirements, or security concerns. The result may then be a section of concrete bearing the marks of its connection and formwork, or CMU serendipitously picking up the rhythm of adjacent brick coursework without deliberately matching it. In older construction, back facades may be the sole surface of a building untouched—recessed guttering and grillage aged to a lurid green revealing techniques long since forgotten or rendered obsolete.

The results are not always beautiful or orthodox, but they are usually interesting; alleys seen in this light could be conceived as both museums and laboratories for material combinations and adjacencies, methods of assembly and detailing. But in another light, alleys are urban canyons—broken glass, vegetation clinging to the fragile mortar joints, with a single swath of sky above; more products of time and erosion, with human intervention to architectonic formations what glaciers are to geology. Again: raw super-nature registered through a Kantian impression of the sublime.

The rapid urbanization and uncontrolled growth over the past century had caused the colonization of cities over nature. This resulted in the recent reclaim of the green to the built environment. The return has been manifested through big (scale) exaggerations: in the outskirts, wherever land is abundant, architects merged architecture with landscape, camouflaged it with green ecological materials, or mimicked bio-natural processes and systems. In the urban setting, given the opportunity, they retroactively greened roofs, walls, or any imaginable architectural surface. What is the antipode to this greening camouflage? Can architecture re-imagine its natural-tectonic configurations where neither nature nor structure “erase,” from after the facts, each other?

In the meantime, in the techno-scientific (figs. 2-3) and art realm the re-colonization of nature comes frequently with highly controlled environments, of very small scale. State-of-the-art research in fabrication and biotechnology have empowered disciplines and simple users to experiment endlessly by manipulating objects and environments to desired conditions. Bio-artists such as Suzanne Anker (fig. 4), engineers such as David A. Edwards, and designers such as Sean Lally (fig. 5) have been testing innovative ideas with scientific standards in laboratory conditions. These works are presented and admired as art pieces or precious jewelry inspired by laboratory aesthetics. Many of the experiments form contained, objectified nature.
Ordinary Lilli-pot Spaces: Rendezvous in Tokyo

Figures 2-3: Kristophe Diaz, Arabidopsis Thaliana Plants Used as Model System in Science, Plant Lab, University of Massachusetts Boston, MA. © Photograph by Zenovia Toloudi

Figure 4: Suzanne Anker, Astroculture (Shelf Life) (01), 2009. Inkjet print on Hahnemuhle paper, 24 x 36 in.

Figure 5: Sean Lally / WEATHERS, Amplification, Los Angeles, California, US, 2006-2007. Installation as part of the Gen(h)ome Project (2006). Curated by Open Source Architecture, Kimberli Meyer, and Peter Noever; The MAK Center of Art and Architecture. © Photograph by Joshua White
The objectified nature forms extend, beyond the art laboratories, in the architectural world. During the making of the *Photodotes* installations the idea was to use objectified nature as part of an architecture that promotes natural light in dark (window-less) spaces. The *Photodotes* series investigate “living” and edible structures, the immaterial as building element, light as energy, and the use of technology in architecture, and gardens. In *Photodotes*, the natural and immaterial elements are integrated in the structure from its genesis; in the case of *Photodotes II* and *III*, plants, fiber optics, water, light, and plastic transparent containers were all composed together to form one whole.

In *Photodotes II: Light Garden*, the pots were sculpted with different criteria or manifestos: to allow growth towards different directions, to follow the form and the intentions of the plant, to help the plant co-exist with other plants, to “force” symmetrical development, to create vertical planting, and to change the functions (fig. 6). They were collectively assembled to co-construct the “circular” *Photodotes Garden*. The collaborative character of the installation registered individual craftsmanship and signature expression for the creator of each pot (fig. 7).

Coincidently, such objectified nature within pots, appears as well integrated in the white, compact, contemporary Japanese architecture. It is not uncommon to discover the incorporation of potted plants both in the recent publications and exhibitions of the most admired, emergent, Japanese architects, as well as in the streets of Tokyo.

*Figure 7:* Zenovia Toloudi / Studio Z, *Photodotes II: Light Garden*. Boston, MA, 2012. Installation as part of Garden Lab exhibition (2012), Brant Gallery, Massachusetts College of Art and Design. Curated by Evelyn Rydz, and Jonathan Santos. © Photograph by Dominic Tschoepe
**Lilli-pot Spaces**

The integration of potted plants, and use of objectified nature form a series of small gardens, spaces that can be characterized as *Lilli-pot*, a composite adjective deriving from the words *Lilliput* and *pot*. The *Lilli-pot Spaces* are constituted by multiple small, precious objects, and objectified, compartmentalized nature, that offer a recursive oscillation between the literal and the minimal, tradition and contemporaneity, singularity and multiplicity, curation and randomness. *Lilli-pot Spaces* like *Photodotes III: Plug-n-Plant* belong to a group of projects, found in galleries, museums, laboratories, and the streets establishing a recognizable architectural style of objectified, compartmentalized nature coming in forms and positions of high surgical precision (fig. 8-9).

How have these common potted plants with their long practical and decorative history become curated objects in streets, patios, and buildings? To analyze their function in space, *Lilli-pot Spaces*, can be examined through their Tokyoite and Japanese occurrence, as well as through the lens of the vernacular, theatrical, Lilliputian, illusionary, curatorial, and social.

**Tokyoite Rendezvous**

The purist and transparent architecture of Ruye Nishizawa (as well as that of Kazuyo Sejima) contains such potted plants, among other personal objects. Like in the case of Nishizawa’s *House A* apartment, the potted plants (both natural and artificial) are not identical to each other. They form a collection of particular ones that become spatial fetishes. They are portable, yet dominant in the space by having a preserved position in co-creating a unique environment. In this, minimal architecture and plant decoration are merged into one thing. Similarly to SANAA architects, Junya Ishigami imagines an architecture in which nature and structure are two equal participants in the production of space. In his *Kanagawa Institute of Technology workshop* (KAIT-Kobo), a collection of randomly arranged potted plants is merged with multiple vertical columns (each one having different profiles) of a lose structural grid (fig. 10). The result is an artificial green and white “forest,” a labyrinth offering multiple routes.
ordinary lilli-pot spaces: rendezvous in tokyo

positions, and the feeling of getting lost. this co-habitation of nature and structure appears in the early stages of design, and in various forms of representation, such as drawings and models.1

in march 2012, artist and mit professor (between 1990-2014) antoni muntadas led a research trip to tokyo investigating japanese public space. during the trip numerous lilli-pot spaces were found in the streets of tokyo (fig. 11) in areas characterized by jorge almazán as an “urban village.”2 the plants bring to mind images and memories from rural, vernacular, and traditional spaces often found in villages and the periphery. at the same time the interplay of potted plants contrasts the futuristic image of tokyo, with a more human scale. the small gardens of potted plants, as well as other similar occurrences, constitute what almazán considers as “shared space.” in this, there is no distinction between walkway and road. instead of separating the traffic, there is a constant human negotiation between drivers and pedestrians. these micro-environments extend the coziness and care usually found in private spaces to the public streets by creating a private-public hybrid, a kind of oasis for busy citizens and wondering tourists. the potted plants, beyond their organic nature, become symbols of the empowered individual who now appropriates their surroundings through them.

from vernacular to theatrical

when toyo ito invited proposals for the post-tsunami architecture during the 13th venice architecture biennale, the architects experimented extensively with the nature-architecture relationship.3 many of the models presented in the exhibition used logs, branches, and other natural elements in vernacular configurations that now seem to form the new canon. for ito the return to the traditional offers a more social and humanitarian approach to architecture. in his lecture at harvard graduate school of design in 2012, ito attributed this influence to his teacher kiyonori kikutake, who had been an independent voice among the metabolists. kikutake’s work had strong influences from japanese traditional architecture (including its small scale). ito presented kiyonori kikutake’s sky house, in which “the tools and furniture, and other beautiful pieces,” were all inspired by the farm culture. another element from the rural house (and culture) that had been very influential for kikutake is that of the column/pillar, and its function to define space around it. ito used the pillar as a dominant element for the home-for-all project, as well as for the design (and content) of the japanese pavilion. the vernacular bound through the small parts and objects interrogates the nature-structure relationship, while presenting marks of collective expression that trace the human hand and the individual taste. the recognition and embedment of these elements in the design synthesis, allows the architects (according to ito) to see things from inside, towards a more social architecture.

in lilli-pot spaces, the vernacular is found also through the appearance of nature, the use of small objects (the pots), and human gesture. these elements contribute to the personalization of the “public” and shared space that occurs around them.

ordinary potted plants have existed in many cultures and contexts since the ancient times for a variety of reasons, like transferring plants and seeds, offering protection from the weather, or being personal objects for tombs. it was around the eighteenth century that they were used for decorative purposes. what seems to be more of a late phenomenon is the very recent, theatrical presence. both in the case of contemporary architects, as well as in the tokyoite informal urbanism, nature (intentionally or not) is incorporated in the architecture, objectified.
By offering the illusionary experience, they smoothen the transition from inability to ability to mature. Toys and puppets are used by parents to communicate messages to their children. For example, a small kid is more easily convinced to eat their food when getting orders from a small puppet or any favorite object, less associated with rules and disciplines, and more linked to joy and pleasure. Similarly to toys, the small plants of Lilli-pot Spaces also become transitional objects between the (now lost) wiring with nature and the contemporary-constructed city and urbanity. Beyond the natural and organic element in them, Lilli-pot Spaces are agents to offer to contemporary busy

Figure 12: Lilli-pot Space in Tokyo, Japan. March 2012.
© Photograph by Zenovia Toloudi
citizens and home users a connection to creativity of the anonymous, carefree, maker of the past. Offering a getaway from reality, design participation, and collectivity, *Lilli-pot Spaces* conceptualize humans’ need for more desired environments to live in (fig. 12).

**Multiplicity or Curating the Small**

In *Lilli-pot Spaces*, as well as in vernacular manifestations, the presence of the anonymous creator (and their hand) is suggested by small parts, small sizes, and small gestures: the small (fig. 13). Japan has been always associated with the small and smallness in cultural and architectural expressions. Avant-garde Japanese architects have been embracing the small through projects, theories, exhibitions, and publications. Through its dimensionality and bodily engagement, the small is comfortable. With small it is possible to understand it, possess it, and observe its fullness. It inspires fantasy and creativity. Like in the case of miniature model makers, the small is associated with a passion for precision: a fulfillment of the detailed controlled activity that dominates many individuals. 

Such desire for control and detail with surgeon accuracy and orchestration is common among architects that enjoy creating and shaping (small) worlds.

Small, as an element, relates not only to size but quantity. Small things coming in crowds can propose an antidote to the singular big action or the one unified mass. Small, being accompanied by the repetitive, exists in many examples of Japanese architecture: the multiple windows of Zollverein School (by SANAA), the repetitive volume-rooms in the *Moriyama House* (by Ryue Nishizawa), and the many object-galleries of the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa (by SANAA). The particularity of each of these small elements is reinforced by the layout of the multiple parts. What appears random or amateurish in the arrangement of those parts is the result of the aforementioned surgical precision. This controlled “randomness,” distinct shape, and particular positions of these plants define the composition and the character of the space, that moves beyond the informal, vernacular compositions, towards the aforementioned staged presence (fig. 14). Potted plants are curated objects that form a recognizable style to be repeated in more and more architectures. Combining many Lilliputian objects into a randomly precise whole establishes a situation where multiple relationships occur while allowing for both autonomy and connectivity among the parts to co-exist. The multiple small parts, instead of the one mass, can be re-arranged to offer flexibility and functionality.
Social Devices

This multiplicity defines the social space and architecture. And it is based on that individual small element that is repeated. In *Things that Talk*, Antoine Picon examined the role of such an element, that of the freestanding column in the eighteenth-century religious architecture. For Picon, this architectonic device, acting as (cultural) mixture of different things, offers heterogeneity and enables social imagination. In *Lilli-pot Spaces*, the construction of social imagination takes place through the aestheticization, multiplicity, and theatricality of these ordinary objects, in this case plants. Being small and many, instead of one big, express the multiple views and truths that exist in a crowd. The multiplicity of the small elements in various compositions reproduces in a way the structural organizations that appear in dense metropolises such as Tokyo. The theatrical and anthropomorphic elements, echoed in these compositions, resemble to the crowds of citizens that exist in dense environments. Like in polymorphic societies, these small elements appear as a collection of unique ones. This assemblage of discrete objects becomes the mechanism to evoke the collectiveness. Being small and affordable, they are available to all. They constitute a more human model of living. They inspire negotiation and mutual respect among the various users of the shared small space.

From Ordinary to Extraordinary

User’s ordinary needs that are often neglected by the architects reveal themselves through user’s aftermath actions, such as plant decorations. However, SANAA, with their detailed drawings and models, including the personal or mobile objects of the users and other remnants of human presence, manifest an architecture that is closer to the users. It understands and engages their needs from its early formation. The objectified natural elements become a choreographed operation that offers visibility and clarity to the crowd. These objects and compartments, elements of soft space are more graspable, and identifiable enough, for the audience to understand, accept, and enjoy. The things that attract the attention are not always the “beautiful” ones, but the ones that link to memories and former experiences. These pots, as familiar and ordinary symbols of the village, become agents to connect humans to their lost nature.

In response to the initial question, natural-tectonic configurations such as *Lilli-pot Spaces* do not erase or camouflage the two antagonists (nature and structure), but they exist in synergic mode: the small potted plants celebrate the contemporary architecture, and the architecture itself welcomes in its structures, forms, and materialities the existence of these plants and small objects (fig. 15). They are not dense, they do not look like jungle; they are a collection of pots, each one having a specific position, presenting simplicity, low-cost materials, the decay of the living, and mostly the underestimated, ordinary things. Japanese architecture, often praised to glorify the social, offers a paradigm of how the ordinary, small little things have power to affect the spectacular big. It also experiments by valuing and incorporating the needs and desires of the user. Such architecture engages the natural, while satisfying the public imagination and pleasure.

The small *Lilli-pot Spaces* are social devices that link architecture and the city through the vernacular; engage interaction that brings human scale; become transitional objects to communicate meanings and awaken memories; perform as aestheticized art(ifacts) that address theatricality and temporality; and eventually offer a kind of design that includes (beyond the lost nature or the organic matter) the expression of the anonymous, ordinary user together with that of the extraordinary designer to inspire collectivity and co-habitation.

Acknowledgments

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1. Photodotes, from the Greek word φωτοδότης meaning “light donors.” The etymology of φωτοδότης is linked to the Greek words φωτό (light) and δότης (donor).

2. SANAA perhaps started to embed these objects in their designs, during (or after) the Plum House. Jorge Almazán, discussion with author in Tokyo, Japan, March 2012.

3. The “Hanahana Flower Stand,” designed by Kazuyo Sejima, is part of the group of objects/plants, merging what may be considered as artificial and natural plants.

4. SANAA’s drawings, models, and photographs of built works all embed elements that personalize the space. These range from plants, flip-flops, carpets, etc. One could say that all these objects contribute to a potential fetishism.

5. The drawings (or models) contain the lines (or figures) of the small, portable plants together with the lines (or volumes/surfaces) of the more stable elements, such as walls, floors, and pavements.

6. “Urban village” is one of the two urban intensities that appear in Tokyo broader metropolitan area. Jorge Almazán (presentation to a group of students from MIT, Tokyo, Japan, March 2012).


8. Even the exhibition is designed to include pieces of nature, like the tree logs. Many of the exhibits are presented in a very small scale.


10. Ibid, 125.

11. The theatricality of Morris’ notion of the “non-personal or public mode” is obvious: The largeness of the piece, the bigger the distance from the beholder, and therefore their isolation. The hidden naturalism, is in fact anthromorphism, and the hidden [-ness] anthromorphism is theatrical.


15. Ibid., 132.


20. To explain this, Picon borrows from Kornilios Kastoriadis the analogy of a chimera.

21. In an effort to understand the fascination of the freestanding column, Picon describes that architecture as a system whose elements are clearly distinguished from one another.

I’ve always felt I understood places that were pretty ordinary, the places you wouldn’t normally look twice at. I’ve always been able to take joy from the less than exceptional, the unsung and the overlooked. The places whose charms creep up on you when you’re not looking.

I grew up in a suburb on the edge of Birmingham, a city in the center of England. You might’ve heard of Birmingham, though probably not for the most flattering of reasons. Its reputation precedes it as the most grey and ordinary of cities, all failed sixties concrete and overambitious civic redevelopments.

The suburb I lived in was remarkable in its ordinariness, with row after row of houses: some terraced, some semi, some detached. Most would have a car outside, sometimes two. The shops on the local parade sold a manner of useful but ordinary things; there were groups of kids hanging around by the bus stop. By the station you’d see the same man who’d always been there selling papers and sweets and cigarettes. It could have been any one of a hundred other places, but the important thing is that it wasn’t.

After leaving home I moved to Sheffield to go to university. Sheffield is another city that might be first perceived as ordinary. I’m not sure why exactly I ended up there, why I decided to choose it, whether it chose me, but I reckon it had something to do with Jarvis Cocker.

Sheffield is a seemingly humdrum kind of place, a city of kitchen sink dramas and strong civic histories played out on a set of hills and estates and steel works. It’s the kind of place made up of wet afternoons and romance, and a soft grit. At first it might seem like just another northern town, but it’s a city that’s stories and charms gradually ebb over you, like the refrain of a Pulp song heard over the radio in the supermarket.

Many of these kinds of places are not outwardly special. They may not even be interesting, aesthetically or otherwise. But they hold something dear, something stemming from frustration and boredom and familiarity. With the wind behind you on a good day they slip into a rhythm as the most exhilarating places in the world, against the odds.

Please don’t get me wrong, it’s not that I like these places exclusively, that I can’t be wooed by the sights and sounds of London, Paris, or New York. It’s just that I feel a part of them. I know what they’re like.
A First Look at China

Text and photographs by Steven Montgomery
The world was on the cusp of a new decade in the spring of 1980. Depeche Mode had just formed as a band, but had not yet released their debut album; the Rubik’s cube made its international debut; and Cable News Network (CNN) became the first 24-hour television news channel. In politics, the Nixon-era engagement with China was just beginning to open the door for Americans into a nation that had effectively been in self-imposed isolation from much of the world since 1949. As one of a group of seventeen students from Ball State University, we were the first students of architecture from the US to travel to the People’s Republic of China.

Travel for Americans to China in 1980 had to be arranged through the US-China Friendship Society, which would consolidate individuals and groups from throughout the US for specified travel dates from gateway cities (there were no direct flights from the US to China at the time). The trips were completely pre-planned and regimented to include a full spectrum of contemporary culture. Extensive advance planning and establishment of local architectural contacts by Marvin Rosenman, the professor who led our group, allowed some latitude within the agenda of the trip for visits to two schools of architecture, a private tour of the Great Hall of the People on Tiananmen Square, and an official reception in a building reserved for heads of state within the Forbidden City. In a nation of bicycle riders, we felt like visiting royalty riding in mini-buses. Even in large cities, our group often attracted crowds of onlookers, curious to see what we were doing and what held our interest. We were reasonably convinced that we were the first people to play Frisbee in Tiananmen Square, attracting a large group of Chinese onlookers and a few participants.

Mao suits were effectively the only fashion option for adults, although they were available in an array of four to five colors. Young children tended to be the living palettes for creative expression in the Chinese fashion world. In the more conservative north, the Mao suits tended to neutralize gender, lending an even greater sense of homogeneity to an already overwhelmingly homogenous population (very few foreigners were in China at the time). In the south, Shanghai in particular, the same Mao suits were worn, but belts were used to give the bodies some shape, and accessories made more of an appearance (typically for women) that softened the bluntness of so much sameness.

Visits on the standard tour agenda included schools (both elementary and high school) where we witnessed five-year-olds in a musical presentation, older elementary students playing violin, and mandatory eye exercises for a high school group. The regimentation and submission, especially from high school students, was both impressive and mildly disturbing for someone from a western and more democratic bias.

Our tours to the architecture departments at Tsinghua University in Beijing and Nanjing Institute of Technology revealed a student population that was technically proficient (including watercolor and hand rendering skills), modest and self-effacing, and fascinated with the atria and reflective glass cylinders of John Portman, who was waning in popularity in the US, but who had clearly made his mark in the world.

We also visited factories and power plants, which appeared to be from the 1950s, but may have actually been newer. They were fascinating in their own right: the silk factory impressive for its reliance on the hundreds of workers and the astonishing blend of manual and automated functions; and the power plant which was disturbingly unsafe because of the complete absence of guards or similar protective measures. One member of our group had her rain coat pulled into the exposed belt drive of a piece of equipment, and had to be pulled from it forcibly, shredding part of the coat, but avoiding injury.

And of course, there was the food. Most of us were willing to try anything that was served to us, which was a wide range that included sea slugs and thousand-year-old eggs. In Shanghai, a visit to the market exposed our group to the farm to fork movement in a visceral way that preceded by decades its somewhat less literal arrival in trendy restaurants in the US. At times we would wince as we speculated that the skinned animal hanging from the hook might be something that we would keep as a pet, rather than prepare for dinner. The market also afforded us a chance encounter with the uncle of notable Chinese-American architect I. M. Pei, who simply overheard our group speaking English and engaged us in conversation.

Our trip gave us the extraordinary opportunity to experience, to a limited degree, the everyday life of a country that had remained inaccessible for three decades. A number of us who made the trip in 1980 have recently begun to discuss a group return in 2016 to witness first-hand the changes that have occurred over the past thirty-four years. It would be fascinating to see all of the new buildings and infrastructure improvements which splash across journals, magazines, and the Internet; to see the interface between the new and the old; and to experience the new ordinary of China today.

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Zhenjiang, 1980 © Steven Montgomery
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Nanjing, 1980 © Steven Montgomery

Wuxi, 1980 © Steven Montgomery
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Shanghai, 1980 © Steven Montgomery
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Wuxi, 1980 © Steven Montgomery
Design Inside Our Daily Lives

Essay by Regina Pozo

Clay pieces for the Archivo Pavilion  
© Courtesy of Archivo Diseño y Arquitectura
“Why are you showing us this?” a visitor asked in an irritated voice as she strolled through the exhibition room of Archivo Diseño y Arquitectura. She was confronted by a simple paper cone cup made in Mexico. The original piece was designed in the United States by Leo Hulseman, a former employee of the Dixie Company who would later open the Solo Cup Company, one of the largest coffee lid and cup providers in the world. The visitor was viewing Happiness is a Cold or Hot Sponge, an exhibition curated by Guillermo Santamarina, a well-established contemporary art curator who has been organizing exhibitions in Mexico since the 1980s. Apart from selecting specific objects, Santamarina commissioned a respected underground writer, Guillermo Fadanelli, to develop fictional stories for each one of them. Objects that already had historical fact sheets were now complemented by a poetic approach. At the same time, Archivo shared why these “simple” pieces are considered extraordinary, hidden behind the veil of their universality, usefulness, and permanence in production lines. “Everyday we are in contact with objects designed with such genius that we forget they even exist, and it is only when they are exhibited in a museum or written about in a book that we realize the transcendence good design has in our lives,” writes art historian María García Holley on her critical approach on Happiness is a Cold and Hot Sponge. For us at Archivo, this is a reigning fact, and our mission is set towards making this affirmation a reality for our public, sensitizing our visitors on the importance of design in our daily lives throughout our program and activities.

Inside its wonderful modernist premises, Archivo Diseño y Arquitectura is a space devoted to collect, think, and promote design and architecture through multiple outlets. Open to the public since April of 2012, it is through very ubiquitous objects that we intend to fulfill our mission: understanding these pieces as indexes that allow us to speak about culture in an experimental, non-academic form.

The project was initiated in 2008 by architect Fernando Romero. Archivo’s only patron, who realized that there was an opportunity to acquire design objects in Mexico and abroad, responding to a context of economic crisis that reigned the global arena. With that framework in mind, we started to build a study design collection that could allow people to confront design icons, references not yet offered by any other space in Mexico City. A historical ABC of design for a local public that we knew lacked this design conscience.

Archivo exercises different public programming. Industrial design is embedded inside our collection and curatorial program, whilst architecture is approached more through practice than through reflective exercises. On the one hand, Archivo’s main research line is the Genealogy Series. This research is structured around a historical approach by which we revisit selected epitomes of Mexican idiosyncratic design: foreign design objects that have been transformed into local classics and reclaimed as Mexico’s own. After two successful chapters in the series—the Corona folding chair and the Panam sneaker—the program will continue its third iteration focusing on the Volkswagen Beetle, an icon representing an important historical moment for Mexico City. On the other hand, the Archivo Pavilion is an initiative that asks architects from around the globe to enhance the use of the space’s Barraganian garden. The open call contest is currently approaching its second iteration, a perfect time to reflect upon Pedro&Juana’s winning proposal for the inaugural edition, its interaction with the space and the visitors, and the possibilities it has opened for future pavilions.
Genealogy Series: The Volkswagen Beetle

Mexico City has gone from being one of the most polluted places on earth to a city that has taken action and that deals effectively with nearly 3.7 million registered vehicles circulating at the absurd rate of a 6 km/H in 2013. This shift in environmental conscience started in 1982, when the IMECA (Índice Metropolitano de la Calidad del Aire / Metropolitan Index for Air Quality) was established as a measuring tool that recorded the contaminant agents polluting the air. The IMECA started to gain mainstream momentum during the early 90s as the smog crisis peaked and entered public health-concerning levels. This crisis was triggered as the two million vehicles mark was reached. The IMECA’s “Hoy No Circula” or “No-Drive Days” program restricted vehicle circulation during weekdays depending on the last digit of the car’s license plate, reducing traffic by a fifth. Furthermore, when particularly alarming IMECA levels were reached, the “Hoy No Circula” program would double its control and school classes would be suspended for the day. At the beginning, this program was put in place only during the winter months; but, because of its high levels of effectiveness, it was established as a permanent rule in the following years. “Hoy No Circula” is still in place today and continues to expand its restrictions in the pursuit of environmental well-being.

Mexico City’s regent (as the PRI used to call the Mayor, who was appointed by the president in those days), Manuel Camacho Solís introduced another program that also proved to be an effective tool to control pollution. This new program was directed towards automotive technology through the introduction of the catalytic converter, transforming the design of an omnipresent car model, dating back four decades: the Volkswagen Beetle Sedan. But it wasn’t until Camacho Solís utilized the Volkswagen Beetle as a way to deliver his political agenda to the capitalinos, not only for public transportation (city taxis), that the Beetle became a true icon.

The catalytic converter was to be installed in every vehicle circulating in the city, starting with the Beetle taxis. This gave way to another crucial transformation in the image of Mexico City: the strategic use of color. From then on, the traditional yellow of the Beetle taxi that characterized the end of the 80s, adopted a more “ecological” hue to represent a modernized fleet. And so, the Vocho—a chilango slang term to refer the Beetle Sedan—turned green. This change in hue, not only represented a government move towards the improvement of the city’s pollution problem, but also spearheaded the “green” movement into the mainstream.
Although a genealogical approach can prove itself ironic at times—for example, when design created outside Mexico forges the country’s identity—several of these objects have helped to draw the face of Mexico through our recent history. Everyone can relate to the ordinary objects inside of the series, which reveals one of the powers of design for us as cultural interpreters. The universal quality of these objects makes design accessible to a larger demographic bracket. Another main interest behind this research is understanding the moment when all the objects of the series become icons. For this effect, these studies try to identify the turning points and the circumstances that position them as icons inside popular culture. Thanks to fashion and other disciplines, these pieces acquire symbolic values, transforming the way we perceive them. Hopefully, the research from the Genealogy Series will also help place them within our own design history, enriching the current documentation of design history in Mexico.3

Public Programming: The Archivo Pavilion

“And just like this, with nothing more to say, and even less to offer, I welcome you to the new ‘Mud Age.’” Wonne Ickx

Wonne Ickx, in partnership with Abel Perles, Carlos Bedoya, and Victor Jaime, form PRODUCTORA, one of the most interesting architecture firms operating from Mexico City nowadays. Besides his work as an architect, Ickx constantly reflects about his own discipline. In La Edad del Barro (The Mud Age), a text he wrote for Arquine magazine, the architect recognizes how a new trend of materials, textures, and techniques has taken over the high-tech components that mainstreamed the architectural market since the 1990s. Ickx reveals that “the basic, the elementary, the vernacular, the primitive, the traditional and, even the precarious, have been crucial concepts that have become the protecting Palapa that free the architects of the legacy of accusations that have been subjected in the last years: as egocentric individuals and friends of the mere visual spectacle.” Ickx takes the tropicalization so far as to evidence the rhetoric of all of this new low-tech approach, for the most part considered by him superficial.

One generation after Ickx, we find Pedro&Juana, a young architectural atelier composed of Ana Paula Ruiz Galindo (Pedro) and Mecky Reuss (Juana) founded in Mexico City after graduating from SCI-Arc. Their entry for the Archivo Pavilion competition rapidly set itself apart from a pool of four hundred proposals submitted from all over the world. Through an anonymous jury process, Pedro&Juana won the chance to construct a temporary installation inside Archivo’s gardens by proposing to use
a singular unit, a handmade clay pot. This pot became the unit used to construct a grid of 750 pots that formed the small amphitheater that has functioned as a concert hall, presentation pavilion, party location, children’s playground, etc. It has ultimately become part of our design collection.

The process of building the pavilion was a kind of experiment, mostly due to the fact that we didn’t know how we were going to build it. Its construction became a challenge as we confronted with several vicissitudes that made it hard to reach a simple solution. Running the risk of failure, these challenges were overcome in great part through the group of artisans that helped us mold around eighty clay pieces a week to reach our deadline that marked Archivo’s first anniversary.

The use of local craft was undeniably appealing to this project as it spoke directly about the way construction processes happen in Mexico. All of the aspects mentioned above generated a solid proposal, in a way separating itself from Ickx’ accusations of superficiality directed toward this type of exercises. This project, at the verge of completing its temporary existence, has been a total success and I hope this sets a high standard for our next call of entries, bound to take place in November of this year.

**Contemporary References**

Mexico City nourishes its inhabitants with millions of stimuli that charge us with an intense quantity of aesthetic references. It has been described as a buoyant creative scene, made possible for the most part by flexibility and a relative affordability (currently threatened by the natural course of gentrification). It possesses a strong contemporary art scene present in the global arena crowned by some of the most important collections of contemporary art in Latin America. Architecture is another prolific area of cultural production in our contemporary realm. A generation of young architects, now in their forties, have become well-established and have provided a very diverse body of work and approach to the discipline.

Industrial design, on the other hand, is a much younger discipline still struggling to find its place in contemporary culture. Spaces for its reflection are not common and design curators struggle to position the discipline as a proper form of cultural production in its own right. With a charged vernacular design environment, delivering something new is complicated and often falls on the verge of auto-folklore. This surplus of referents is often verbalized as a virtue but can also cloud a designer’s perspective, preventing them from being able to interpret these references appropriately to produce a contemporary one.

I hope that through the different initiatives of Archivo we begin to address these issues, identifying icons of the everyday through the Genealogy Series but also using the upcoming Archivo pavilions to create a new language that can accurately communicate our state of design with the outside world.

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1. Archivo is located next to Architect Luis Barragán’s house. Since our arrival with LABOR Gallery, the street has converted into a must-go destination for enthusiasts. Barragán bought the piece of land where Archivo was housed in the early 1940s. He then sold the plot of land of Archivo in order to construct his house from 1945–1947. Archivo’s house was constructed in 1952 by modernist artist and designer Arturo Chávez Paz with its garden following Barragán’s design dynamics. As the house was abandoned for almost three decades, the garden decayed, losing the possibility to call ours, a seventy-year-old garden concealed by a modernist facade, an original Barragán design.

2. 2,300,000 registered as private and 1,400,000 for public transport, INEGI/SETRAVI.

3. The Corona Chair, a foldable tin specimen, and the Panam Sneakers have been the other two everyday objects selected for this series. Archivo, Impreso 01, http://issuu.com/archivoda/docs/archivo_impreso_01_web, 41; Archivo, Impreso 02, http://issuu.com/archivoda/docs/archivo_impreso_02, 66.

Wrong Chairs

Project by Norman Kelley (Carrie Norman and Thomas Kelley)

wrong I. a vagabondage of the imagination, of the mind that is not subject to any rule.¹

The Wrong Chairs are an exercise in error. The collection consists of seven chairs that purposefully disrupt the notion of “correctness” by applying a medley of design mistakes to the iconic American Windsor chair. The Windsor chair, with its British roots, has become a symbol of colonial America—a chair that is unadorned and democratic in design. More importantly, however, it is also a forgettable chair. You might vaguely remember your grandmother having one in her kitchen. At first glance, the collection blends into the images we hold of domestic memories we’ve encountered at some point or another, but, at second glance, they’re more unreasonable. In using an object readily recognized and imbedded with nostalgia, the collection utilizes the Windsor chair as the control—a seemingly ordinary object—for the exploration of “wrongness.”

Inspired by deceptive optics and adapting specifications from master craftsman Dr. John Kassay’s drawings of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American Windsor furniture, the collection plays an optical game (paused only when the observer is seated), taunting the observer to pay attention and to interpret the visual boundaries of anamorphism, trompe l’oeil, and forced perspective. In provoking the observer to confront a traditional object transformed with intended error, the historic Windsor chair is resituated through a contemporary lens that is at once defective and functional.

What we typically perceive as being wrong with design often hinges on geometric imprecision or a lack of command over tolerances. We concede, however, that most things are susceptible to being wrong. Our aim is to discipline that potential for error toward new forms of making and observation. So please do sit down. The collection is at once both wrong and right. While the chairs may appear at times broken or unbalanced, they are structurally sound.


Wrong Chairs
Wrong Chairs
Linda Just is an architectural designer at Solomon Cordwell Benz in Chicago. Formally trained in architecture, she spent several years refining her understanding of sonic environments while working in acoustics. She maintains a stubborn curiosity and keen interest in form, sound, aesthetics, perception, and their roles in multidisciplinary design.

distantbellevether.com

David Karle is an Assistant Professor of Architecture at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, College of Architecture, where he teaches design studios and lectures on contemporary forms of American urbanism.

tomkeeley.com

Steven Montgomery is an architect with Harley Ellis Devereaux in Chicago where he focuses on special needs and senior housing and care environments. He is a 1983 graduate of Ball State University and is one of 17 architecture students who were the first from the US to visit The People’s Republic of China in the spring of 1980.

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Norman Kelley is an architecture and design collaborative between Carrie Norman and Thomas Kelley based out of New York City and Chicago.

Thomas Kelley (March, Princeton University / BArch, University of Virginia) is a Clinical Assistant Professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago and a Visiting Critic at Syracuse University. Carrie Norman (March, Princeton University / BArch, University of Virginia) is a licensed architect and Design Associate with SHoP Architects in New York City. Their design work is represented by Volume Gallery in Chicago. Most recently, their work has been featured in Log 32: New Ancients and in the 2014 Venice Architecture Biennale.

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Michal Ozjarzowski is a graduate student at the University of Michigan Taubman College and an alumnus of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. He is interested in the mutually influential relationship between form and society. He has practiced at STL Architects in Chicago and HSG9 in Poland.

Ordinary Architecture is a new practice recently founded by Elly Ward and Charles Holland, both formerly of FAT Architecture. Currently they are delivering A House For Essex designed by FAT with the British artist Grayson Perry while designing two more new houses in the UK. Charles is the current Eero Saarinen Visiting Professor at Yale and both he and Elly teach at schools of architecture and write regularly for a number of architectural publications.

ordinaryarchitecture.co.uk

Antonio Petrov is presently Assistant Professor at the University of Texas San Antonio, and Caudill Visiting Critic at Rice University. He also serves as co-program director of the Expander at Archeworks, director at WAS, a think-tank in Chicago, and as editor-in-chief of DOMA. His research emphasizes processes of urban and regional restructuring in relation to questions of how architecture as an expanded and geographically inspired idea structures, shapes and produces complex territories.

Regina Pozo lives and works in Mexico City. She holds an B.A. in Art History by the Universidad Iberoamericana. Since 2008, she has been the Director and Curator of Archivo Diseño y Arquitectura, a private non-profit foundation devoted to promoting and exhibiting design and architecture through collection and public programming. Inside Archivo, Pozo has worked as a consultant for private clients, such as 3M, and cultural support platforms such as Bonus Creative Week. She works as an advisor for other curatorial initiatives and private collectors.

michalozjarzowski.com

Ordinary Architecture has won many awards, including the Heinrich Tessenow Gold Medal, the Arnold W. Memorial Prize of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the International Award Architecture in Stone in Verona, and the RIBA International Fellowship 2014 of the Royal Institute of British Architects.

campobaeza.com

Deborah Fausch is an architect and architectural historian/theorist/critic. She has taught at Parsons School of Design in New York, University of Illinois at Chicago, and Washington University in St. Louis. She is a co-editor of Architecture: In Fashion; her writing has also appeared in Perspecta, Daidalos, archithese, Any, and various edited compilations. She is working on a book concerning the architectural and urban theories of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown.

Michael Hirschbichler is the principal of Atelier Hirschbichler, a Zurich-based practice for architecture, urbanism, design, and cultural studies. He taught architectural design at ETH Zurich, was the director of the architecture program at the Papua New Guinea University of Technology in Lae, Papua New Guinea, and is currently heading the Bachelor/Master studio in architecture and urban design at the chair of Prof. Dr. Marc M. Angélil at ETH Zürich.

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Ordinary Architecture has been featured in various leading publications, such as Bonus Creative Week. She works as an editor-in-chief of DOMA. His research emphasizes processes of urban and regional restructuring in relation to questions of how architecture as an expanded and geographically inspired idea structures, shapes and produces complex territories.

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Joshua G. Stein is the co-editor of the forthcoming book on dingbats published by DoppelHouse Press in 2015. He is the founder of Radical Craft, a Los Angeles-based studio that develops methods for the translation of craft operations into broader scales and domains. He has taught design studios and fabrication seminars at California College of the Arts, Cornell University, SCI-Arc, and the Milwaukee Institute of Art & Design. He was a 2010-11 Rome Prize Fellow in Architecture, and is currently an Associate Professor of Architecture at Woodbury University.

radical-craft.com

Zenovia Tolouidi is architect, artist, and Assistant Professor at Studio Art, Dartmouth College. She has received a Doctor of Design degree from Harvard GSD, a Master of Architecture from Illinois Institute of Technology (as a Fulbright Fellow), and a Diploma in Architectural Engineering from Aristotle University of Thessaloniki in 2000. Zenovia founded Studio Z, a research and art-design practice that centers on architecture, ephemeral and adaptive structures, and experiential installations. She has taught at Harvard, MIT, IIT, WIT, BAC, Aristotle University, and Hellenic American Educational Foundation.

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The Cover

The task I received was straightforward: letter the word “ordinary” in a grocery style on a 18x24 inch paper. My approach was to define how to achieve a publicly acceptable visual ordinary that carries a slight touch of a point of view. I choose for my work to be purpose based, informed by discipline, tradition, history, and impact. I chose LaSalle for it’s visual and conceptual alignment through a lifetime of fluctuating ordinary behaviors. The curves and bends on the fifty posters painted for this series celebrate the innovation of Chicago’s Lettering, Inc.

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We continue our tradition of developing the winter issue of MAS Context in collaboration with a guest editor. This year the guest editor will be illustrator and editorial designer Luis Mendo.

Issue 24 / Winter ‘14 will focus on Tokyo, the city where Luis is currently based. Building upon his love for the city, the drawing event PauseDraw, and his continued exploration of the city through drawing, this issue will compile personal views of the city drawn by different artists, curated by Luis. It will reveal Tokyo’s built environment, its culture, its people, and everything that makes it one of the most fascinating cities in the world.

24 / Tokyo Winter ‘14
will be published in December 2014.

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