NEVER TOO SMALL

Creative, compact and joyful ways to design and live.
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“All the small things”

– BLINK-182

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INFORMALE

“Remember when clothing was made in your hometown? Not many do.”

Says Informale’s co-founder and designer, Steve Calder.

“Making clothes here in Melbourne isn’t enough. My hope is that the clothes we make will end up in future vintage shops many decades from now. That’s why when it comes to design, I love referencing vintage clothing. Chances are if a 60-year old jacket still looks great today, our version of it will look great in another 60 years.”

Thinking decades ahead is a rare perspective in today’s fast-paced fashion industry, where clothing is often designed for fleeting trends and limited wear. With a steadily growing local client base and 9 stockists worldwide, it seems like “Made in Melbourne” is making a comeback and Informale is leading the charge. **Join the Clothing Revolution**

Carla Díaz's bench in Agrentina.

Lisa Lu's bench in the USA.

Marie Chardon's bench in France.

Marie Gruszczynski's bench in the USA.

Doan-Thao Dang's bench in France.

Elena Denissova's bench in the Netherlands.

We embarked on a little experiment in the making of this issue of our magazine. We asked you, and our friends and followers across the socials, to be part of it. And you did not disappoint. Who knew we were striking such a nerve when we asked you to send in photos of public benches? You guys *really* like benches. Which is great because there's an entire feature on them on **p184**. We managed to get 46 of your photos of them into these pages. Benches from all over too – from Singapore, Japan, Malaysia, Italy, Serbia, Belgium, Latvia, Austria, the UAE, USA, Switzerland, the UK, India, China, Norway, Finland, Argentina, the Philippines, South Africa, Denmark, France and Australia. We loved seeing the benches that have charmed you from parts of the world we are yet to visit.

As well as public design that prompts you to pause, we've also got some design inside that's looking for something a little more active from you. Earlier this year, I had the pleasure of meeting and chatting with Wisconsin based Tom Loeser **(p174)** who is in the business of making furniture that stakes a claim on your attention and gets you thinking (and moving). From human-sized lazy Susans with Tom Loeser to human-sized nests: Kate Kolberg has covered the inspiring philosophies and output of Icelandic design collective ÞYKJÓ **(p228)** who are making it their mission to remind us of the powers of play and make believe.

You can linger in a state of nostalgia with A Shop of Secrets **(p140)** too. We came across artists Aamu and Johan and their *Salakaupa* (secret shop) project at Milan Design Week back in April and we were immediately enchanted by the beautiful things they make and the remarkable stories behind them. Our cover star Loo Lok Chern (AKA Cloakwork) also delivers a hit of nostalgia **(p032)** both with his retro Malaysian pop art inspired street art and his home stacked with cartoon figurines and other colourful characters. Dutch artist and designer Bertjan Pot shows us what happens when his "hands surprise [his] head" **(p116)** and be warned: your introduction to Austria's WIENER TIMES on **p128** means every cushion you ever encounter from this day forward will strike you as miserably dull and grossly inadequate.

These pages feature some of our heroes too, with maverick Malaysian landscape architect Sek San Ng sharing his unique approach to heritage conservation with us that centres on preserving the "living culture" of buildings and communities as well as the structures that shelter them **(p048)**. Learning about his "Third World Aesthetic" and his wild levels of resourcefulness and creativity have been a significant source of inspiration to us and we will continue to follow his work closely since he is a self professed "social media bitch".

Jack Chen has been a hero of ours since we set foot inside his *Type Street* apartment ("the one with the bike on the wall"). This design remains one of the most watched episodes on our YouTube channel and at the time of sending this off to print, it had racked up almost eight million views. Since then, Jack has been joined by Hidy Wong at his practice Tsai Design and we were lucky enough to spend a day with them in their gorgeous butcher's shop home/office conversion learning about their love of awkward spaces **(p016)**. There are more compact homes to admire and take inspiration from, as always, from San Sebastián, Rome and Paris **(p058)**.

Finally, from heroes to honours, it is such an honour for us to be able to print the *10/1* photograph series from Romania's Bogan Gîrbovan on these pages **(p104)**. You may well have seen this celebrated and fascinating collection of photographs on Instagram, but we hope you'll enjoy poring over them in print as much as we have.

I'll leave you to it.

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24 HOURS *in* GEELONG *with* TSAI DESIGN

WORDS KIRSTY MUNRO

Jack Chen and Hidy Wong of Tsai Design. Hidy is learning to skateboard and was a good sport for showing us her skills. Images: Nam Tran.

ASPIRING TO DESIGN HOMES THAT ARE RELATABLE AND RESPOND NATURALLY TO THE RITUALS AND ROUTINES OF DAILY LIFE MIGHT SOUND LIKE A QUIET KIND OF ARCHITECTURE. AND IT IS. BUT AS THE SAYING GOES, YOU HAVE TO WATCH THE QUIET ONES.

While driving to meet Jack Chen and Hidy Wong of Tsai Design I start thinking about Radiohead and specifically, about the band's first big hit: *Creep*. The story goes that the band felt it overshadowed their other music and resented having to play the song at their gigs. Even before the song became a hit, the band's lead guitarist Johnny Greenwood expressed his displeasure at what he considered to be a "wimpy" song by adding some grit in the form of the distorted and angry bursts of guitar that made the track so iconic. I was fortunate enough to see Radiohead live in 1998 at Festival Hall in Melbourne – a year after they released *OK Computer*. It was a standing gig and there were only four rows of people between me and the stage on which Johnny Greenwood stood, electrifyingly rage-strumming that guitar. I wonder: does this same thing happen to architects when they kick-off their career with a spectacular genre-defining hit? Do they too get locked into repeating something that other people just can't get enough of when all they want to do is move beyond it and create newer and better things?

Type Street was Jack Chen's first solo project. If you don't know it by name, you might know the 35-square-metre apartment as "that one with the bike on the wall". And this design was genre defining. It completely reframed the possibilities of the 'six-pack[1]' apartment building, a typology one of this magazine's writers, Jana Perković described as "the unsung hero of Australia's vernacular architecture" in *Assemble Papers* back in 2019. So when I eventually arrive and get settled at Jack in Hidy's home/office in Geelong (a coastal city just south-west of Melbourne), I've barely had time to take a sip from the flat white Jack has kindly procured from their charming neighbouring cafe before I ask: *do people come to them just asking for their own version of Type Street?*

No. Jack tells me. Or not really, anyway. Their clients instead come to them to solve the problems of their awkward spaces. A compact home with multiple decks and courtyards on top of a shop (*Atop A Shop*), a single aspect 25-square-metre apartment (*St Kilda Micro Sanctuary*), an open plan apartment with a hyperdiscrete kitchen (*Small Grand Apartment*)... that sort of thing. And clearly there are plenty of people with awkward spaces, as when I visit their office, its main wall is dotted with images referencing a vast number of live projects. And ultimately, Jack says, "we hate to repeat."

While *Type Street* was completed in 2016, Tsai Design and Jack's transition to solo practitioner became official in 2018. "I think after working at six or eight firms I realised, this is my last chance: I was already 30-plus, maybe 35," he says. His frustration had been building in response to his lack of creative autonomy.

1 *To borrow again from Jana and* Assemble Papers *and their wonderful article 'Singing the praises of the six-pack apartment in Richmond': "...with that distinctive boxy, Lego look in red or cream brick, [the six-pack] first started springing up in the 1930s around Australian suburbs (...) It is not quite clear where the name comes from: the six-window façade to the street, the footprint of six flats per level, or the uniform look of tightly packed flats of monotonous design; but the name, unreferenced, persists both in informal conversations and theory books."*

Jack and Hidy added an internal courtyard to their home at the back of their office to welcome light into what was a very dark space. Image: Nam Tran.

Passersby knock and ask if they can buy the models in the window. Image: Nam Tran.

(Below)

Shooting hoops inbetween briefs. Image: Nam Tran.

(Below)

Jack and Hidy in what was once the front of the butcher's shop but is now their office. Image: Nam Tran.

(Above)

A hinged timber screen means Jack and Hidy can literally shut up shop and have some privacy from the street out of business hours. Image: Nam Tran.

"I would get two weeks on a project and then I would have to move on and never see the project again," he says. "I could come up with 20 designs a year but never get to see it." Tsai Design began as a "side hobby" – a creative outlet and brand under which Jack would tinker with and produce small scale design objects. Tsai is Jack's Chinese name. "So, in the logo you can see there's an extra stroke next to the 'T' and that's the Chinese character of my name (才)." *Atop a Shop* was a sort of bridging project: one briefed to his former employer, but an agreement was struck that as the design was Jack's, once complete, he could claim it as his own under Tsai Design. The project was shortlisted and commended for multiple awards in 2020 but it was *Type Street* that really put Tsai Design and Jack Chen's name on the map.

Small Grand Apartment was Hidy's first project at Tsai Design, and she and Jack have now been sharing the firm's design load for six years. The way the pair work together is very much shaped by Jack's previous experiences at other architecture firms. "I came from a background where you never really got to design," he says. "It was always the boss who was designing and then you just tried to realise that concept," Jack tells me. This is why, when it comes to a new project brief, Jack and Hidy both design at least one concept each and pitch these options to their client at one of their very first meetings. "Doesn't that get *competitive*?" I ask. "It's probably competitive from one perspective," Jack says. "But the other perspective is that I'm trying to give everyone a chance without having the boss overriding your design. I think that's more important."

Once the client selects their preferred design – Jack's or Hidy's – that person then takes the lead on the project through to completion. "And so you have a sense of ownership – you're building your own design." Jack describes the shift they witnessed in the level of trust clients will then place in Hidy. "Because they know it's her design." The competitive element though remains fascinating to me, not least because Jack and Hidy are a couple and are getting married in November. As they're touring me through their home Jack cheerfully points out all the design details Hidy was responsible for. He does the same as I'm enquiring about specific details such as the shock of blue inside the pantry in *St Kilda Micro Sanctuary*. "That was Hidy," he says yet again. Which prompts him to smile and add "perhaps I am competitive because I always remember who did what."

Jack and Hidy's home/office was its own awkward puzzle. Both are based in one half of a former butcher's shop. Before Jack and Hidy bought it, it had been converted into what was aspirationally marketed as a "two-bedroom residence" with somewhat of an enterprising eye. Only very recently have Jack and Hidy completed their own renovation, converting it into their shopfront office with their welcoming home at its rear. Like all of Tsai Design's work, it's a very calming space. It feels like a new palette though. One dominated by raw brick, concrete floors and lime washed plywood (the presence of the latter prudently driven by the fact that it was already there from the previous renovation and didn't look half bad) and washes of a gentle almost Corbusier-blue. What is not new, however, is the way the space gently reveals thoughtful details that prompt me to smile at their cleverness.

Hidy tells me that when she got into architecture she had no interest in designing "generic skyscrapers" as she wanted to be at the coal face of daily life and designing homes that make its routines and rituals simpler and more joyful. "I quite enjoy knowing who is actually using the house or using the space I designed for them."

It's a thoughtfulness reflected in small details such as an ingenious foldaway workstation in the passage between the sleeping space and the apartment's bathroom in *St Kilda Micro Sanctuary*. At face value it would seem ludicrous to block the only passage to and from the bathroom with a desk, but as Hidy understood, her clients only needed this desk for once in a blue moon when the pair of them happened to have scheduled clashing video call meetings. As it was such an infrequent need, why give this desk a greater sense of permanence or real estate in the home's footprint?

These clever ways of tuning a design to flex its functionality not only in response to needs, but also the *frequency* of those needs – and all without sacrificing a single inch of a home's footprint.

• • •

(Left)

Hidy in the hallway that connects the Tsai Design office to their home at its rear. Image: Nam Tran.

(Below)

Jack sits just above the "contentious" dish drying rack/landing for the stairs leading to their second level. Image: Nam Tran.

(Right)

Hidy in the cosy sun trap second level space that is most often used for shared lunches and Jack's "me time" spent playing video games. Image: Nam Tran.

(Middle right)

Recycled brick tiles add warmth and texture to the living room. A pull out bricked step on wheels was made for Jack's mother to make climbing the stairs more comfortable. Image: Nam Tran.

(Below)

Jack's gaming controllers are stowed on charging racks next to his console inside a neat little shallow cupboard beneath their TV upstairs. Image: Nam Tran.

Jack and Hidy couldn't resist putting in a long stainless steel topped kitchen bench. Hidy designed the Colorbond wrapped facade of the bench. Image: Nam Tran.

Having relocated to Melbourne from Sydney in 2015, Jack had been renting a flat for a year or so in Richmond when another flat in his building came up for sale. Having lived in a near identical apartment, he was intimately acquainted with all of its virtues as well as its shortcomings and the plans for what he would do to address them had already formulated in his head. It was an easy decision. Jack bought the apartment and the renovation of *Type Street* was completed in 2016 on a modest budget and – despite appearances – with mostly humble materials and off-the-shelf appliances and fittings (many from IKEA and the Australian hardware chain Bunnings). For Jack, the idea was to see if he could "fit a big house in a small apartment" as he didn't grow up in apartments in either Taiwan (where he lived up until the age of nine) or Sydney. So despite landing his breakout hit in this genre of architecture – the micro apartment – it was a typology that was completely foreign to him. Interestingly, this is not the case for Hidy, however, who draws regular inspiration from her experiences and memories of apartment living during her childhood and adolescence spent in Hong Kong.

Hidy's gentle influence can be seen coming through Tsai Design's projects in what Jack remarks as a more adventurous approach to colour and material than his own. I ask if the striking copper mirrored pod in *St Kilda Micro Sanctuary* came from Hidy, but it turns out this was driven by their client. "They wanted something louder," Jack says. "I think a mirror would disappear and make the space feel so much bigger." Hidy's touches include little surprises of colour in *St Kilda Micro Sanctuary* and washes of pastel shades in their larger residential projects such as *Treeview Cottage* and *The Final Edit*. Currently, she is finding her inspiration related to colour and materials mostly in European design and in other unexpected places. "In retail the materials and uses are different from residential designs so I'm quite inspired by that," she says. "They're often a lot more hardwearing, economical and nicer too." The colour palette for the Paris 2024 Olympics was another source of inspiration: "That purple track and all the colour combinations – they were very new to me."

• • •

(Above)
The copper pod that Jack would have kept as a standard mirrored surface to make the structure "disappear" in *St Kilda Micro Sancturary*. Image: Tess Kelly.

(Left)
The clever "sometimes" fold down desk in *St Kilda Micro Sancturary*. Image: Never Too Small.

(Right)
Hidy's surprising shock of blue inside the kitchen pantry and storage of *St Kilda Micro Sancturary*. Image: Tess Kelly.

Returning to *Type Street* – Tsai Design's first big hit – it is one of the oldest episodes on Never Too Small's YouTube channel and it remains one of our channels most watched. It has been viewed almost eight million times and continues to stand out for its enduring relevance and wealth of inspiration. Commenters on the episode declare Jack to be a "genius" or describe how their "jaw dropped" in response to the black three-metre long bench, dramatically inset into all that discreetly detailed timber cabinetry. Others swoon over the peg board-style entrance nook: as handsome as it is practical. Many gush over the brilliant home/office integration. This is where it starts to feel like wizardry.

A white floor-to-ceiling cabinet that partially divides the living room and bedroom appears to be just that, but when its middle panel folds up and under its top panel: ta-da! There's the TV. In another mode, the bottom panel folds up to 90 degrees, where it's secured in place as a desk. Inside the mirrored cabinet immediately to the right of the desk is a hidden keyboard, a mounted desk lamp and a monitor on a retractable arm. The sliding door to the left of the desk separating the living room from the bedroom can also be used as a whiteboard for impromptu ideation sessions.

And then there's the dining space. But there is no dining space, you say. Which seems strange, you add, given the intent expressed by the four-metre long kitchen with the three-metre long bench. And you would be correct, as there is no dining space. At least, not yet. But with a gentle tug of a timber panel hidden behind the bedroom's cabinetry, a sort of slideable flatpacked table capable of entertaining up to six guests (with the aid of a pair of stools that were also flat a second ago and have just been plucked from the shallow cabinet above the TV). As entertaining was not a regular occurrence for Jack, this *sometimes* approach to a dining space felt entirely natural and practical.

(Below left)
The panelled wall that conceals a TV, a desk and a pair of stools in *Type Street*. Image: Tess Kelly.

(Below right)
The entrance in *Type Street*: A tailored place (entirely adaptable, given the pegs can be moved) to hang coats and hats, drop your keys, deposit your shoes, store your umbrella *and* your wine. All within an inconceivably compact footprint. Image: Tess Kelly.

(Above)
Type Street is often affectionately referred to as "the one with the bike on the wall". It's also the one with ingenious mirrored skirting boards. Image: Tess Kelly.

(Above + left)
Now you see it, now you don't: the pull-out dining setting at *Type Street* uses knife rack magnets from IKEA ("they're really strong," Hidy says) to guide and secure the folding parts. Images: Tess Kelly.

(Below)

Jack designed his Drop Leaf Table for *Small Grand Apartment*. In it's regular form, it's a compact table for one two two but when the leaves are folded up and out it can seat up to six. Image: Tess Kelly courtesy of Tsai Design and Qspaces.

(Right + above right)

The enveloping timber-lined sleeping space in *Small Grand Apartment*. Images: Never Too Small.

(Left + far left)

The show-stopping eight-metre long continuous Corian benchtop that extends from the apartment's entrance, along the expanse of the kitchen and all the way to the bathroom in *Small Grand Apartment*. The bathroom door is almost invisible given it closely hugs the protruding bench on its way through. Image: Tess Kelly courtesy of Tsai Design and Qspaces.

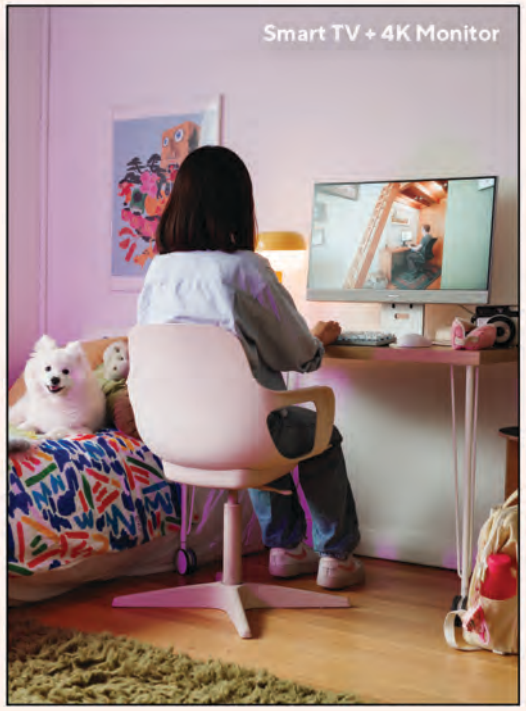
Small Grand Apartment is another gem full of surprises. Understated but game-changing ones like skirting boards that double as drawers and show-stopping ones like the eight-metre long continuous Corian benchtop that extends from the apartment's entrance, along the expanse of the kitchen and all the way to the bathroom (*through the bathroom door!*). It also features an elegant piece of furniture Jack custom designed for the apartment: his *Drop Leaf Table*. The final surprise is delivered, much like the dining area in *Type Street*, when you notice the absence of a bed. Capitalising on the heritage apartment's arched doorway that previously led to its dark and pokey kitchen, an elegant timber vaulted ceiling crowns a warm timber cocoon, lined with cabinetry. Strategic uplighting and a mirrored wall at the end of this space add to its allure and curiosity is rewarded by the reveal of a queen size Murphy bed behind said mirrored wall. While a Murphy bed might not be everyone's cup of tea, for the owner, it brings a greater degree of flexibility to the space. While she might keep the bed in place most of the time, when entertaining guests, it's nice to be able to fold it away. Once again, it's an apartment design that is the product of some very close listening.

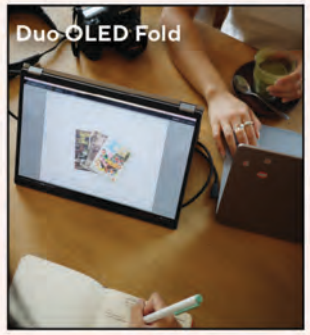
• • •

As someone who appears so attuned to individual human needs and responding to them through thoughtful design, I'm surprised to learn that Jack is "not a people person."

"It's like I keep moving further and further away from people – from Sydney to Melbourne," he says. And now Geelong – a smaller city still. And even in Geelong, Jack is making a new kind of break for it – to get away from it all. This time though, he's moving up. They have planning permission to build a roof terrace that will snatch them a sea view. Given the footprints of the diminutive structures below this planned roof terrace, it is most certainly an awkward space abound with complexities. But this is of course, Jack and Hidy's speciality.

When Jack and Hidy renovated their home/office, they adapted the claimed "second bedroom" from the previous owner's renovation into their office but they still wanted space for guests. The resulting second level they have designed and built is a compact sun-trap of a lounge where they like to share lunches and Jack also likes to retreat regularly to play video games (his "me time"). From this second level, a ladder leads to an even more compact loft space and a spare bed for guests. (This is what the planned roof terrace will be perched on.) Surprisingly, all of this extra space and additional functionality has taken *nothing* from their floor plan: the base of the staircase borrows its steps from a bricked bench seat in the living room and the upper section of the staircase runs along the top of the appliance hub within the kitchen. Its midpoint landing though is "probably the most contentious element," Jack admits. As it doubles as the kitchen sink's draining rack. Not for everyone to be sure, but given Jack and Hidy's is a shoes-off household (we too are provided with house slippers when we arrive) and the landing/drying rack is large enough to relegate a corner to feet and and the remainder to drip-drying dishes, I feel it's something I could get on board with. I mean, the point – as is the point with all of the intelligent but unconventional design solutions across Tsai Design's portfolio – is that *Jack and Hidy* are on board with it and given it is *their* home, that's all that really matters.





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CHARACTER DRIVEN

WORDS KIRSTY MUNRO

ON A HUMID AFTERNOON IN KUALA LUMPUR, Loo Lok Chern, better known by his graffiti alias Cloakwork, is back home after a whirlwind "spraycation" across Europe. Over the course of a month, he painted murals in Berlin, Vienna, Paris, and Rotterdam, all while juggling commercial deadlines from Malaysia. Despite the jet lag, he's buoyant and animated: much like the colourful characters that dance across his walls and canvases.

Chern's work is instantly recognisable: playful, character-driven, and steeped in a distinctly Malaysian sense of humour. From a disused shed transformed into a giant vintage safety matchbox to a nostalgic rendering of an old-school *kopitiam*-style cafe to a cheeky parody of everyday brands and icons, his art channels the textures and quirks of local life. He blends graffiti with graphic design and storytelling, inserting cartoon-like characters into surreal, scene-setting environments. But his murals do more than brighten walls, they tell stories that resonate with passersby, drawing on childhood memories, pop culture and the rhythms of urban Malaysia. There's an unmistakable affection in his work – for *nasi lemak* packets, tin toy boxes, old-school logos – that evokes the warmth and wit of shared cultural memory.

Born and raised in KL, Chern grew up in a city that always felt like it was in motion. "It makes me restless too," he laughs. "It pushes me to create." As a student commuting daily by train, he passed graffiti-covered riverbanks that doubled as jam spaces for artists from around the world. "There were new masterpieces every day. I was fascinated." His entry into graffiti was instinctive: more drawn to images than words, he pursued a degree in illustration and painted his first tag, "Chern," on a grey wall in KL using unsold spray cans from his father's hardware shop.

Like many emerging graffiti artists, his early work didn't always last, often painted over within days. At first, this stung. "I'd get demotivated when a piece got covered," he admits. "But I realised the experience mattered more. Every piece taught me something." His murals today are rooted in that ephemerality, but they also strive to connect. One such story took the form of his *Safety Match* series: small, site-specific murals styled like vintage matchboxes, inspired by an old shed he passed that reminded him of an open matchbox. "People used to rely on matchboxes before lighters," he says. "It's something almost forgotten, but still deeply familiar."

(Left)

A mural in Montana Store, Vienna during Chern's "spraycation" across Europe. Image: Cloakwork.

(Far left)

Chern pictured with one of his pieces in Oaxaca, Mexico. Image: Cloakwork.

Chern's popular Safety Match Series sees rusty old sheds and other structures transformed into beacons of Nostalgia for KL locals. Image: Cloakwork.

(Below)
A mural on a street food stand in Mexico City. Image: Cloakwork.

(Right)
Another nostalgic mural inspired by the Pop Pops fire cracker brand. Image: Cloakwork.

That balance between past and present, humour and homage, is at the heart of Chern's visual language, which has evolved over time. In the early days, he focused on developing character designs and playing with colour. Over time, his approach has deepened to include storytelling and emotional resonance, as well as a thoughtful relationship with space. While he avoids locking himself into specific subjects or recurring characters, his pieces are united by a distinct energy – a vibe he hopes is instantly recognisable. "It's more about capturing a feeling than repeating a formula," he explains. Balancing nostalgia with playfulness is key: he stays true to his emotions but never takes things too seriously. "I always try to bring in a sense of fun through colours, characters or little surprises. I want people to smile, feel something and remember their own stories too."

Public space is where that creative philosophy truly comes to life. For Chern, the grey areas of Malaysian cities – abandoned message boards, staircases, alleyways – offer both challenge and opportunity. "They're not black or white. They're in-between spaces. And I like transforming them into something new." He doesn't seek out sites in advance; he waits for a wall or space that just "feels right." It's about the energy, he says, not the location. He doesn't romanticise the impermanence of murals, either. He knows their fate is uncertain. One recent piece in Vienna depicted a graffiti artist in a stand-off with a city cleanup worker. "Each fresh masterpiece is met with a fresh coat of paint," he says. "It's a silent battle between expression and erasure, rebellion and regulation."

Now, some 15 years into his career, Chern remains just as curious. Whether sketching mural concepts by hand in his stack of sketchbooks or working digitally for clients, he stays open to inspiration from unexpected places – a YouTube clip, a childhood memory, a passing conversation, the shape of a building. "I was barely aware of architecture before," he muses. "But now I think about how a space makes me feel. How you walk up a staircase. That matters."

A playful adaptation of a nondescript building-side packed with Chern's trademark levels of colour and character in Osaka, Japan. Image: Cloakwork.

Nostalgia also finds a home in Chern's personal space. The home he shares with his partner Zoe, a fellow illustrator, designer and tattoo artist (@zozogoods), is a cheerful, colour-filled retreat. Together, they've renovated a standard Malaysian apartment – "just a rectangle," he jokes – into a warm, functional living and working space. Walls were removed to open up the kitchen and studio, and storage solutions were designed to fit the couple's creative habits.

"Interior design is an art too," he says. "You need to know how to store things right." The open storage they chose means everything is on display, but the effect is curated, not chaotic.

His go-to spot at home is the studio. Though it opens into the living room, a Persian rug in the studio space marks the boundary. Natural light pours in, and beyond his desk lies a view of lush greenery. White metal shelving lines one wall, festooned with vivid Japanese snack packets, retro toy cars, and characters like Bob the Builder, Mario, Miffy, Woody from *Toy Story*, and Cloaky – Chern's own signature plastic collectible. A pinboard overflows with postcards and concert flyers, and one bay is dedicated to spray cans in every imaginable colour.

"Right now, my favourite item on the desk is a customised Bearbrick in a construction outfit," he says. "It's a small reminder that life is always a work in progress, and that I should trust the process." He proudly shows off a postcard featuring original artwork by the New York graffiti legend Futura (Leonard McGurr), drawn for him during an event in Hong Kong. "It's something I really treasure."

(Top)

Chern and his partner Zoe in their colourful kitchen and dining space. Image: Auni Athirah Azmi.

(Right)

Chern at work in his studio working on colour selections. Image: Auni Athirah Azmi.

(Left)

Chern and Zoe's creative touches and love of colour are seen throughout the home - even on the framing of their recessed ceiling and what remains of the wall they removed to open up and combine their studio and living spaces. Image: Auni Athirah Azmi.


SOFVIPS


NEW DROPS


LONDON TATTOO GUIDE
STICKER BOOK
Never Too Small Vol. 2


GOLD
DON'T DIE TODAY
SPRAY SAFE
SPRAY CATION


DENIM SENG


KAWAN BAIK
BUDDY
BLACK
GOLD


Dick Bruna
Dick Bruna

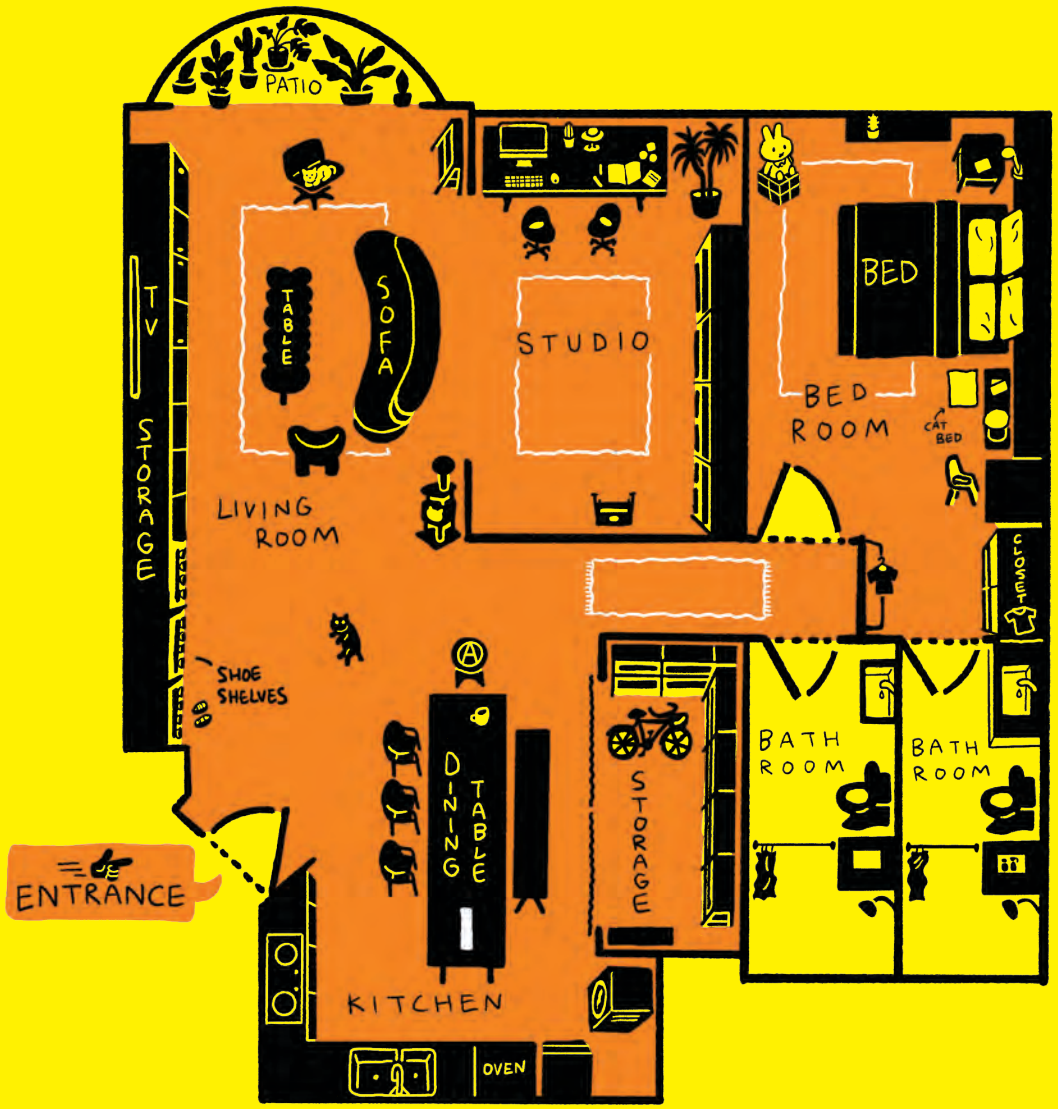
CLOAKWORK & ZOZOGOODS FOR NEVERTOOSMALL MAGAZINE ISSUE #5

(Below)

Chern's illustrated floor plan of their home features small details dotted around their home, including the couple's two cats: Pirate and Pia.

(Right)

Chern's studio space is packed with and surrounded by sources of inspiration and colourful things that make him happy. Image: Auni Athirah Azmi.



THE CLOAKWORK WAY: FROM IDEA TO WALL

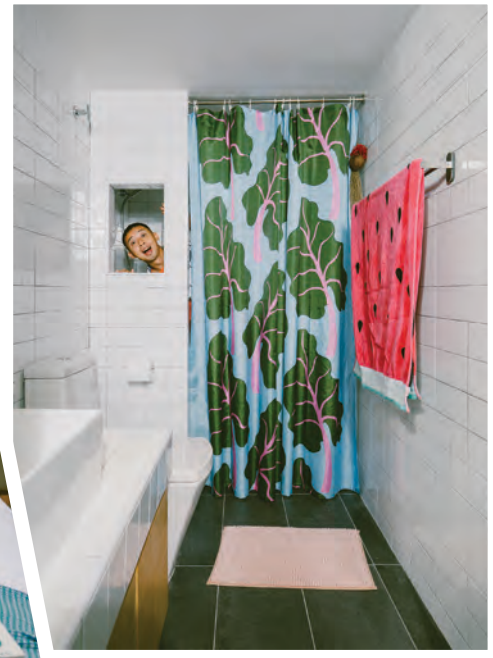
1. It all starts with discovering an interesting wall or object in a public space. Sometimes I stumble upon them while walking around. I look at the surroundings to understand what kind of story or subject would feel "right" in that specific context.

2. Once I've studied the space, I begin brainstorming ideas that would resonate with it. The idea can be inspired by the place and location itself or even just a playful twist I want to introduce into the space. I think about how art can interact with its environment and tell a story.

3. I am a pencil, pen and paper person, I do everything in my sketchbook. I create multiple variations, exploring compositions, characters, and how the visual elements will come together. At this stage, I just keep testing and refining until I find a direction that feels solid and exciting.

4. Next, I think about the expression I want to convey. The colour palette follows this mood. I carefully select the colours that enhance the feeling of the piece while also considering how they'll interact with the wall or surface I'll be painting on. I write everything down in my sketchbook to keep things organised.

5. Depending on the size of the wall and the complexity of the design, it usually takes me 1-2 days to complete a piece. While I try to stick to the original sketch, I often leave room for spontaneous adjustments. These elements of unpredictability are part of what makes street art so exciting!



(Top left)

"Sometimes when I'm stuck or stressed about an idea not working, I ... flip through magazines like *Popeye* from Japan..." Image: Auni Athirah Azmi.

(Top right)

The bathroom too features playful pops of colour. Image: Auni Athirah Azmi.

Looking back from the kitchen and dining space towards the living area: colour and interest adorn every surface. Image: Auni Athirah Azmi.

When he's not in the studio, he's probably in the kitchen. Zoe is the main cook, and Chern serves as sous-chef. Since they both often work from home, meals provide a daily rhythm. They always make breakfast together: something simple like fried eggs or avocado on toast. They try to cook lunch and dinner together, too. Hainanese chicken rice is often on the menu.

Throughout their home are playful, sentimental objects: art prints, design books, sketch pads, and a giant pink rubber duck found at a Paris flea market that now lives in the bathroom, one of the few white spaces in the home. "We're attracted to colour," he grins. "Not brands. Just whatever makes us happy."

Though the home feels like a retreat, it also fuels his creative energy. "Sometimes when I'm stuck or stressed about an idea not working, I take a break and look at the art around me, flip through magazines like *Popeye* from Japan, or play with our two cats. It helps!" Surprisingly, he doesn't turn to music for motivation while he works. "Actually, I listen to lo-fi as a form of white noise to cut out distractions, or I don't listen to anything at all."

Looking ahead, Chern dreams of one day meeting Banksy, "to see how he cooks up those stories, and how he manages to be so prolific but also anonymous." He's inspired by artists like Felipe Pantone, who combine art with architecture, citing his "Casa Axis" artist hub, a funky 1970s villa outside Valencia, Spain. Chern hopes to travel more and explore the visual cues that give places their unique character. "Every culture has nostalgic images that are recognisable, even if you didn't grow up there," he says. "They give you a sense of place."

But no matter where his work takes him, Chern stays grounded by a simple belief: "Do good, and good will come your way." It's a sentiment that mirrors both his cheerful, curiosity-driven style and his own happy-go-lucky nature. After all, for Cloakwork, where there's a wall, there's a will.

iamcloakwork.com
@cloakwork

(Below)

"Playful, sentimental objects" are found throughout the couple's home, with both being drawn to whatever makes them happy. Image: Auni Athirah Azmi.

Malaysian landscape Architect Sek San Ng. Image Courtesy of Seksan Design.

Open Door *Policy*

For 40-odd years, renegade landscape architect **Sek San Ng** pioneered a new form of South-East Asian design. One that championed affordable materials, local labour, equitable access, and a whole lot of plants. This month, we were lucky enough to sit down and chat all things architecture with Malaysia’s legendary green maverick.

Words James Shackell

When Malaysian landscape architect and urban designer Ng Sek San visits a destination, the first thing he does is seek out the slums. The poorest of the poor neighbourhoods. Places so removed from our traditional notions of architectural ‘style’ and ‘beauty’ as to make those concepts seem almost obscene. Like haute cuisine in the middle of a famine.

“That’s where I get a lot of my inspiration,” Sek San admits. “I walk in slums. I photograph slums. I look at scale and light, and how they use local materials, including cardboard. Because all those things are free of charge. Scale is free of charge. Light is free of charge.

“When people have no resources, but they have dignity, that’s when creativity gets maxed.”

It’s not the typical holiday beat you’d expect from a world-renowned architect. But then Sek San Ng isn’t really your standard commercial operator. Over a much-chronicled 40-year career, this rebellious, do-more-with-less spirit has given him some very firm ideas about how buildings should actually be built.

For one thing, they should be cheap. Not in the sense of poor quality or cutting corners for the sake of profit, but literally affordable to build. And to live in. Designed to maximise the wellbeing of the maximum number of people.

While most commercial developers might allocate 70 per cent of their budget to materials and 30 per cent to labour, for example, Sek San reverses that ratio. He employs local builders wherever possible, pays them good wages, and builds his buildings from deliberately unglamorous, home-spun materials: concrete, recycled timber, old copper pipes, forgotten industrial machinery, recycled signage, cardboard. Anything he can get his hands on. Imperfections aren’t just tolerated, they’re celebrated. Nothing is wasted, and nothing travels a single mile more than necessary.

This not only keeps costs low, but allows Sek San to limit the carbon footprint of his projects.

Double-glazed windows? Meh. A frivolous luxury. In Malaysia, where humidity tops 80 per cent and summer temperatures regularly hit 30 degrees celsius, glass is considered a premium material, usually reserved for big-budget commercial jobs and climate-controlled residential compounds. As such, many of Sek San’s buildings have no closeable windows and very few doors. Light, air and people are encouraged to flow through a space uninhibited. Birds literally nest in his office in downtown Kuala Lumpur.

Integrated heating and cooling? Nope. Instead, Sek San opts for plants, which ramble and creep over his designs in dense green curtains, providing low-cost insulation, passive cooling and free oxygen - all at the same time. Trees sprout not just through the floor, but through furniture[1]. Roofs are often clear plastic, because that’s the cheapest way to keep the rain out and let light in. After a couple of years, Sek San’s jungle projects tend to look less ‘built’ and more extruded from the landscape, like overgrown temples from some ancient civilisation with impeccable taste.

“I don’t need cladding or windows,” Sek San says, “just time for the plants to grow. I’ve always said that time should finish a project for us. It’s the fourth dimension of a building. You know, modern buildings, they look good at the beginning, but then they start to deteriorate. I think a good building should be timeless.”

1 Another of Sek San’s fundamental principles is that trees have right of way. Even when building bungalows in the dense Malaysian rainforest, any tree with a diameter of more than a couple of inches is incorporated into the design, rather than cut down.

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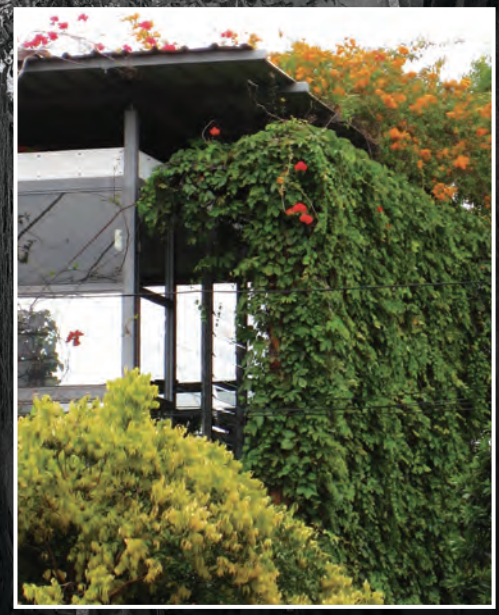

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1. Sek San seeks inspiration from slums. 2. Birds literally nest in Sek San's office in downtown KL. Images 3-4. The before and after of Sek San's office: "I don’t need cladding or windows ... just time for the plants to grow. It’s the fourth dimension of a building". Images courtesy of Sek San Ng.

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Images 5-8: “Can we build a guesthouse in the forest without knocking down a single tree?” Sek San asks with his design of Sekeping Serendah. Images courtesy of Seksan Design. Images 9 and 10: Sek San builds his buildings from deliberately unglamorous, home-spun materials: concrete, recycled timber, old copper pipes, forgotten industrial machinery, recycled signage, cardboard. Anything he can get his hands on. Images courtesy of Sek San Ng.

Sek San Ng was born in the Malaysian tin-mining town of Ipoh, on the Kinta River, about two hours north of Kuala Lumpur. As a teenager in the 1980s, he moved to New Zealand, eventually earning both a Civil Engineering degree and a Postgraduate Diploma in Landscape Architecture.

After completing his studies, Sek San spent 12 years in New Zealand and Singapore, working with big firms like Boffa Miskell Partners and Belt Collins International. Carefully sharpening his philosophy. Sucking up inspiration from renowned figures like American landscape designer, Martha Schwartz. In 1994, he returned to Malaysia to establish his own practice, Seksan Design, resolving to eschew the glamorous climes of Europe and America and focus all his energy on improving the lives of ordinary people in his own region. He’s been designing and building here - almost exclusively here - ever since.

This means that, while the name ‘Sek San Ng’ may not be widely known outside South-East Asian architectural circles, within those circles, it’s revered. More than any other designer, Sek San coined and pioneered the idea of the “Third World Aesthetic” - a design philosophy which has literally changed the trajectory of South-East Asian architecture.

“I started my younger days as a student activist, so we were always campaigning for the underdogs and the poor,” Sek San says. “I guess that kind of infiltrated into our design philosophy.

“The Third World Aesthetic is about championing the slum. The raw. The local. The grit. The grime. But it’s also a way in which we can differentiate ourselves from western thinking. Because if we do the same thing as designers are doing in Japan or Europe or America, we can only ever be second best. We have to find our own design language.”

There’s no better example of this design language than Sek San’s passion projects - the Sekeping Retreats. These boutique Malaysian guesthouses are scattered across the country, from Bangsar in KL to the small jungle town of Rawang, and each one tackles an idea, or a problem, or a thought experiment. Ideas like, “Can we build a guesthouse in the forest without knocking down a single tree?” or “Can we pick up and move an old warehouse, piece by piece, and turn it into a jungle oasis?”

“I was proposing a lot of these ideas to developers, and they couldn’t understand them,” Sek San laughs. “I couldn’t get them into my commercial projects. So I thought I’d have to do it myself. I wanted to demonstrate to other developers that we can build in these difficult environments without destroying them.”

These Sekeping projects often came about organically. In one instance, Sek San was visiting a rundown industrial warehouse to buy a second-hand bicycle, when the owner casually offered to sell him the warehouse instead. That structure was reassembled and converted, piece by piece, to become part of Sekeping Serendah, nestled within five acres of tropical rainforest an hour north of KL.

On another occasion, Sek San's lawyer called out of the blue, saying there was a crumbling, three-storey neoclassical building for sale in Ipoh - Sek San's old home town. Did he want it? Turns out, that building was part of Sek San's childhood. He grew up around the corner. When his school master caught the boys with unruly hair, he'd shave it off and send them to the barber here to finish the job. And that old barber was still there, all these years later, still sweeping the floors! Sek San immediately reached out to some wealthy contacts and, together, they purchased the property - which turned out to be more like an entire city block - turning it into Sekeping Kong Heng. A mixed-use tourism, hospitality and retail precinct that eventually helped rejuvenate the Old Town itself[2].

"The idea behind that one was: can we do heritage conservation without it costing an arm and a leg?" Sek San says. "Because in Malaysia we cannot be like Singapore, where they restore the building to its original form, using horsehair and lime wash and everything. Conservation here is often so expensive that owners will just burn their properties down instead, then rebuild new."

To that end, Sek San and his partners wanted to leave as much of the original structure as possible. Even trees growing on the old building were preserved - natural markers of age and time. "They're all part of history. They tell a story," Sek San says. "I think that old buildings should remain old buildings."

Sekeping Kong Heng also demonstrates Sek San's unique approach to heritage conservation, which is that a building is only as valuable as the people and stories inside it. What he calls the 'living culture'. In the case of Kong Heng, that meant the original tenants, like Sek San's old barber, some of whom had been working in the building for over 35 years. Rather than push these businesses out to make way for faux-industrial cafes and high-end retail spaces, Sek San and his partners encouraged them to stay, fixing their rents and upgrading their facilities. Sek San's barber was given a custom-built glass hair salon, right in the centre of the building, where he continued to work for another nine years.

Sek San's other commercial projects, like the vibrant community and culture hub REXKL in Kuala Lumpur, follow this same spirit. They're not about gentrification but rather rejuvenation. And those are two very different things. Gentrification is a force for the New, but it often comes at the expense of the Old: existing tenants, existing architecture, families, ecosystems. Vulnerable people who get priced out of their own neighbourhoods to make way for young professionals who, as Taylor Parks once wrote, are "willing to pay for that coffee-house slice of bohemia". Crime goes down. Rents go up. And everybody wins - except for all the losers.

This is anathema for Sek San. Gentrification implies exclusivity, and if there's one thing he stands for as a designer, it's including as many people as possible. And not in some abstract, metaphorical way. Literally including them.

In his office in KL, for example, the entire ground floor is a free-use space for artists, human rights groups, or basically anyone that wants to just come and hang. WIFI is fast and free, and there are no gates or doors. Sek San even built a small bench out on the street, near the office, so migrant workers would have somewhere to pause and sit with their shopping. He and his staff often leave books out there for street cleaners to take home and read to their kids.

2 Keep in mind, all this was long before Ipoh made Lonely Planet's 2016 Top 10 List and became an international tourist destination. When tin metal prices fell in the 1980s, Ipoh's local economy collapsed, and for many years the city struggled with poverty and neglect. Especially the Old Town, where Sekeping Ipoh is located. As Sek San puts it: "The city was left to rot". Nowadays, of course, Ipoh is positively cool. Malaysia's answer to Hoi An or Chiang Mai.

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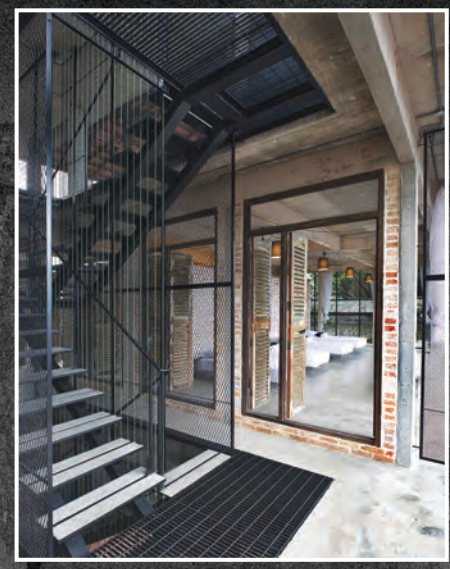

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11. The original character of Sekeping Kong Heng has been preserved. Image: Siew Jen Chee. 12. The boutique guesthouse within Sekeping Kong Heng. Image: Rupajiwa Studio. 13. One of Kong Heng's original tenants. Image: Siew Jen Chee. 14. Sek San's old barber in his custom-built glass hair salon within Sekeping Kong Heng. Image courtesy of Sek San Ng. 15. Another of Sek San's culture hub projects REXKL. Image courtesy of Sek San Ng. 16. The retail precinct within Sekeping Kong Heng. Image courtesy of Sek San Ng. 17. The free-use communal space in Sek San's office. Image courtesy of Sek San Ng.

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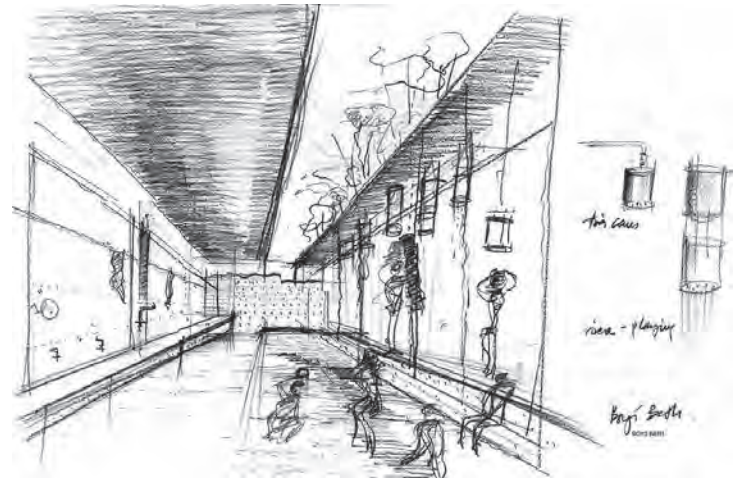
(Right)

One of Sek San's sketches of the Dhammagiri Foundation Orphanage's bathrooms, featuring recycled tin can shower heads. Image courtesy of Seksan Design.



While other designers might toss around words like ‘community’, Sek San actively builds human connection into every single project. It’s basically the reason his projects exist.

This is a luxury not every designer has, of course, and the reason Sek San can pick and choose his buildings boils down to money. Specifically where it comes from. Instead of the archaic patronage models that have sustained architects and landscapers for centuries - rich private clients, governments or cashed-up commercial developers - Sek San relies on like-minded partners, or even social media crowdfunding.

“I’m a social media bitch,” he laughs. “And this is what I tell young architects. You do not need patronage. You don’t need governments. If your idea is good enough, pitch it and people will invest in you.”

Using this crowdfunding model, Sek San has built everything from an orphanage in Thailand (Dhammagiri Foundation Orphanage) to a community farm smack-bang in the middle of residential Kuala Lumpur (Kebun-Kebun Bangsar). And all designed with his signature Third World Aesthetic. Local materials. Local workers. A willingness to embrace imperfection, age and decay. Abundant plant life. And a total disregard for engineers, clients or the bureaucratic whims of Malaysian permit law. When he built Kebun-Kebun Bangsar, he did it on public land, and without the permission of the local authorities. The first they knew of it was when vegetable crops and cows started colonising downtown Bangsar.

“They’ve tried to evict us twice already,” Sek San laughs. “They sent me a letter threatening a 500,000 ringgit fine and five years’ jail time. I tore it up and threw it in the bin. Then we used social media to fight back.

“This was why we set up Kebun-Kebun Bangsar in the first place. It’s not just a farm. We set it up to teach young people their rights to land, to resources, to food. Unless we fight for these things, they will never be given to us automatically. We are meant to give people inspiration to do more. We are meant to be disruptive. So that’s what we’re going to be - disruptors.”

Images 18-22: With limited funds, The Dhammagiri Foundation Orphanage relied on the support and collaboration of local low-skilled workers and children from the foundation alongside creative fundraising efforts. Scrap and recycled materials, such as monks' robes in place of bunk bed curtains, are found throughout the project's design. Image courtesy of Seksan Design. Images 24-25: Getting children involved at Kebun-Kebun Bangsar urban farm in Kuala Lumpur is a key part of the project for Sek San. Image courtesy of Sek San Ng.

Project: Unplanned Domestic Prototype
Design: Ismael Medina Manzano
Size: 60 sqm/646 sqft
Location: San Sebastián, Spain

INTERVIEW ELOÏSE LACHICORÉE

Here is the apartment reimagined. Where rigid conventions are dispensed with in favour of walls that "breathe" and storage that "does not hide" but boldly takes centre stage. Flexible and multifunctional furniture facilitates a fluid existence and seamless shifts between social and domestic modes. Ismael Medina Manzano is an architect who believes his role is to design solutions fit for the future as well as the present. *Unplanned Domestic Prototype* is an offering that is open-ended – where life can unfold and evolve – inviting new and unexpected stories to inhabit it over time. It is this ability, to bend naturally to the needs of its current owners while remaining ready to meet the needs of the next, that Medina Manzano believes will ensure the apartment's relevance over time.

What were you starting with when it came to this project, Ismael?

The apartment had been in the client's possession for some time, but I don't think they were living there. It was a highly compartmentalised space typical of its time, a sequence of small, enclosed rooms organised around a narrow hallway, with very little connection to each other, or exposure to natural light. The infrastructure was also ageing: the installations were outdated, the surfaces showed signs of wear, and the spaces were very inflexible.

What was your brief? Were there specific desires in relation to colour and materiality or did this direction come from you?

The clients envisioned a space not only for themselves, but also as a place their extended families could enjoy when visiting. While they requested specific functional elements, such as ample storage and a guest toilet, they gave us a remarkable degree of freedom when it came to spatial strategies, materiality and colour. It was a deeply collaborative process, grounded in open dialogue about how architecture could facilitate, rather than dictate, their way of living. They were enthusiastic about exploring unexpected textures and bold colours, and were genuinely open to experimental approaches. From the outset, there was also a shared commitment to selecting sustainable materials and reducing the renovation's environmental footprint wherever possible.

Which features of the space underwent the most drastic changes?

I would definitely say the apartment's spatial configuration. We removed some of the original partitions, introduced a radial 175 degree curved wall, and created a large multifunctional foyer. The kitchen was also reconceptualised to further enhance the apartment's flow and functionality. Overall, I would say that these changes have redefined how the space is experienced.

How have Spain's housing typologies and approaches to residential architecture changed more broadly since the building was erected in 1966?

In 1966, housing in Spain was still profoundly shaped by post-war scarcity, the need for efficiency, and mechanisms of social control. Residential layouts often featured private, domestic spaces and favoured small, compartmentalised rooms, and long corridors. Today, contemporary housing increasingly embraces openness, flexibility and hybrid layouts, reflecting a more diverse, interconnected, and dynamic society.

One of the apartment's most striking features is the central, curved green wall and its sandstone threshold. What inspired these elements?

The curve emerged from a desire to amplify the space and to challenge the rigid boundaries of traditional rooms while responding to the client's needs. The sandstone threshold, instead of simply dividing spaces, creates a fluid connection between them. Its form – irregular and intrinsically tied to the material's extraction methods, reduces post-processing and champions a more sustainable, ecological approach. The layers of the stone also accentuate the passage of time, transforming the threshold into an active part of daily life. I think it's about rethinking boundaries, not just as physical limits, but as moments of transition that shape both our interactions and the environments we inhabit.

Tell us about the theoretical research you've conducted into storage systems and how you implemented your research and findings into the design of this project…

My exploration into storage systems revealed that storage is not a static or secondary function but a vibrant, evolving infrastructure that weaves together the domestic, the urban and the political. Traditionally, storage was pushed to the leftover spaces of the home where the act of storing was rendered invisible – detached from the pulse of daily life.

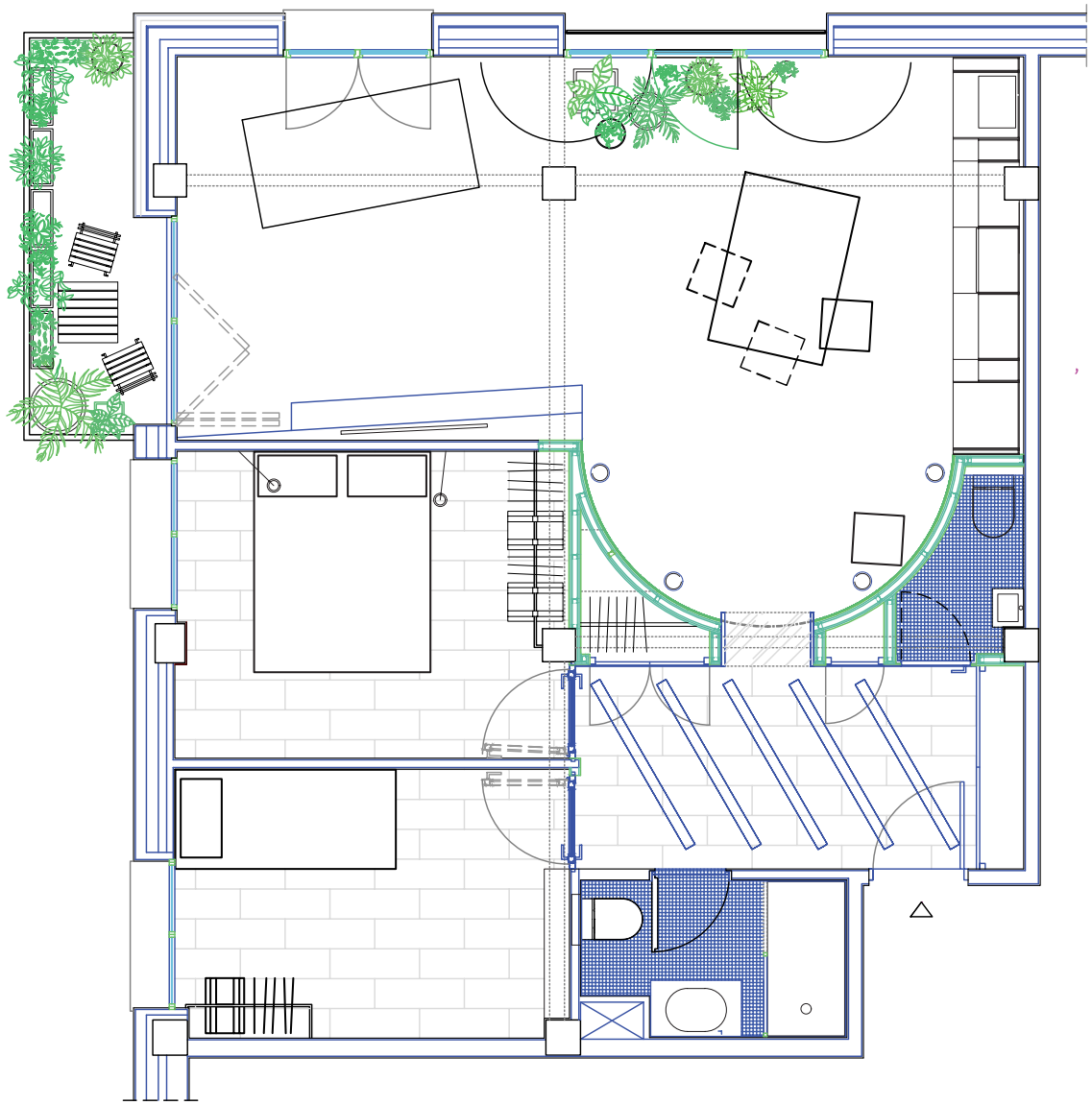
(Top right)

A height adjustable table on castors also doubles as a plant stand to allow house plants to be easily relocated. Image: hiperfocal.

(Bottom right)

The curved green tiled wall is both the apartment's striking centrepiece and a key feature in breaking the rigid boundaries of the traditional compartmentalised apartment layout. Image: hiperfocal.

The locally-sourced sandstone threshold between the entrance way and adjoining kitchen and living space creates a fluid connection between the previously divided rooms. Image: hiperfocal.



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> Today, however, storage disperses and spills beyond the walls of the house where closets, pantries and cabinets are no longer silent containers; they can become active agents – tools that reconfigure the domestic as a space of negotiation.

In this project, storage does not hide, it occupies centre stage. The radial wall unfolds to accommodate storage space, whilst erasing the rigid separations between rooms and their functions. For me, it's as if the wall *breathes*: adapting to shifting needs, welcoming unexpected and dynamic uses. Rather than *containing* life, this project's storage enables its flourishing, making visible the political and dynamic negotiations that shape contemporary living.

What drove the end decisions in relation to materiality for the project?

The material choices were driven by the intention to work with local materials and to strengthen the connection between the apartment and the identity of the place it inhabits. We also wanted to work with materials that could reflect light, introduce interesting textures and establish a tactile relationship with the body.

You designed a number of flexible furniture pieces for the apartment, can you tell us about them?

We designed a series of flexible pieces that extend the principles of adaptability and openness embedded in the project. The height-adjustable table acts as an extension of the kitchen but can also be reconfigured with a simple touch to rise, shrink, or move, to support different domestic activities beyond its original association with the kitchen.

The red coffee table, set on wheels, is more linked to the living area, yet remains multifunctional, and can easily become a dining surface, a workspace or a table for gatherings. Finally, the plants placed on mobile platforms I think are almost like living inhabitants. They act as both companions and as flexible partitions, allowing the space to transform to suit different activities, or to create moments of privacy or openness as needed.

I understand you also chose and curated the apartment's furnishings and design pieces. How did these choices influence the design or how did the design influence these choices? Were these decisions made in parallel or only once the design and project were complete?

The furnishing process ran in parallel to the project but both were quite symbiotic. We searched for pieces that reflected adaptability and flexibility, aiming to make the apartment easily adaptable to future situations. The furniture and architecture grew together, constantly shaping and reshaping one another.

Bright and bold primary and complementary colours are used throughout the space. How do you like to approach colour in your work?

> For me, I see colour as quite a political tool. It can mediate relationships, signal transformations, and reject the neutrality that architecture is often expected to maintain. In *Unplanned Domestic Prototype*, colour becomes a way to activate space and affirm the presence of those who inhabit it.

(Top right)

The depth afforded by the 175 degree radial curved wall allows for generous storage and a small guest toilet accessed via these mirrored doors. Image: hiperfocal.

(Bottom right)

The apartment's flexible furniture pieces tie in with the project's adaptable nature. The height-adjustable table can be reconfigured to suit a range of needs and uses of the space. Image: Alejandro Fabbri.

(Left)

Materials such as sandstone, glazed tiles, exposed concrete and metal beams were carefully selected to offer a range of textures that interact with each other in a unique and dynamic way. Image: hiperfocal.

(Below)

The mirrored kitchen was designed to "enhance the apartment's flow and functionality". Image: hiperfocal.

(Right)

Acting as an extension of the interior space, the balcony connects domestic life with the outdoors. Image: Alejandro Fabbri.

(Right)

Creating greater flexibility in the house, the moveable TV stand with wheels can suit a range of different activities. Image: Alejandro Fabbri.

(Above)

The green painted steel beams and exposed concrete feature in the bedrooms also add a sense of continuity. Image: Alejandro Fabbri.

(Above)

The bathroom was always destined to be a bold, monochromatic space. Image: hiperfocal.

(Left)

Sourced sustainably, the sandstone threshold's raw and unpolished texture highlight its natural extraction process and the project's focus on utilising local materials. Image: hiperfocal.

Texture is another striking feature of the apartment, along with a tension between refinement. What was your intention?

We wanted to embrace the idea that architecture inevitably holds contradictions when approached purely through the lens of style or aesthetics, for example: refinement and rawness, completion and incompletion. But if you shift perspective towards ecological thinking, these materials are not as different as they might first appear. They are all exposed to the same processes of extraction, transformation, and ageing; ultimately revealing a likeness between them rather than a division. Through this tension, the apartment becomes a place where different modes and materials coexist, offering a more complex and honest relationship with matter.

Can you talk about the interactions and contrast between the interior and exterior spaces in the apartment?

The apartment's interior is conceived almost as a landscape: fluid, open, yet articulated. The galería and balcony, on the other hand, act as a threshold between domestic life and the outdoors. The constellation of plants orbiting through these spaces introduces adaptability and helps to blur the boundaries between the interior and exterior spaces, allowing the home to breathe with the rhythms of the environment.

Was the bathroom always destined to be a bold, monochromatic space? What inspired the colour choice?

Yes, from the beginning we really wanted the bathroom to feel like a hidden, yet vibrant world. The intense blue creates the sensation of stepping into a different climate, its own space within the home. It also becomes a point of attraction and perspective when the door is opened, drawing you into a contrasting atmosphere.

If the apartment was being exploited to its full multifunctional potential, what kind of activities might take place here over the course of a busy weekend?

The space could shift from a quiet reading spot to a relaxed setting for a dinner with friends, or even a space for an impromptu yoga session. It could host a community meeting, an art exhibition, or even act as a working desk spilling out onto the balcony, offering a connection between the private and public.

The space acts as a socially adaptive domestic landscape fostering new ways of inhabiting common spaces, and as an active tool in the construction of community, learning and collective expression.

What inspired the project name?

The name *Unplanned Domestic Prototype* reflects the ambition to design a home that resists rigid planning. It is a prototype in the sense that it functions as an ongoing experiment, proposing an alternative model of living that is open-ended, adaptable and intimately connected to the ever-changing nature of contemporary life and its unexpected situations.

***Unplanned Domestic Prototype* is your first residential project: how has it shaped your current practice and design philosophy?**

Unplanned Domestic Prototype was the first of a series of built residential prototypes. I think it really reinforced the idea that architecture should provide platforms for the future rather than just solutions for the present.

I became even more committed to designing spaces that allow life to unfold in a free and evolving manner, connecting with other elements – both human and non-human, that shape everyday experiences. In this way, architecture becomes more flexible and responsive, actively contributing to our social fabric, both current and future. I would also say that the project solidified my belief in wanting to create spaces that don't simply reflect current needs or style, but also act as tools to facilitate a broader, more dynamic coexistence.

How do you see this apartment being used in years to come? Did this influence your design in any way?

We imagine it will continue to transform with new inhabitants, uses and stories, with unexpected new elements layering over time. This vision deeply influenced the design of *Unplanned Domestic Prototype*, in the hope that it can bear change without losing its vitality.

If you had to describe this home in three words, what would they be?

Inclusive, Transformative, Unpredictable.

Project: appartement rhin
Design: minuit architectes
Size: 43 sqm/463 sqft
Location: Paris, France

INTERVIEW ELIZABETH PRICE
IMAGES MINUIT ARCHITECTES

A desire to exploit the expansive glazing of appartement rhin's single aspect is what drove the decision to remove all of its existing walls, but it was a love of outdoor bathing that determined the placement of its new walls. Less walls and more an encasement in fact; embellished by textured glass and an elegant sash window to facilitate privacy, or indeed, social interaction depending on the mood and desires of the bather. This is a mode of design that keenly interests the team at minuit architectes – extraction of all that is superfluous in order to focus on necessity. This way, what is essential is all that remains. And who's to say a bath is not essential in the small home of someone who dearly loves to bathe?

Where in Paris is the apartment?

The apartment is located in the north of Paris, in the 19th arrondissement. Positioned between the Parc des Buttes-Chaumont and the Canal de l'Ourcq, it benefits from a richly contrasting urban and natural landscape. Despite these varied surroundings, the 19th remains one of the most densely populated and lively districts in the city.

Tell us about your client and their brief.

The client, an architect–designer, was seeking a compact retreat for himself and his partner – a kind of quiet capsule, shielded from the bustle of the street. One of his key desires was to take full advantage of the long glazed facade to heighten the sensation of space. With the apartment being relatively small, the main challenge was to craft a layout that would maximise both the living and sleeping areas in a fluid, functional way.

What was the apartment like when you first saw it? Any major challenges or advantages to be exploited?

When we first visited, the apartment was in fairly good condition. It followed a conventional layout: a closed bedroom, toilet, bathroom and a separate kitchen. At the rear, a pantry completed the floor plan. One of the main challenges was to create a well-ventilated living environment – especially for the humid areas – in spite of the apartment's single orientation, which made cross-ventilation impossible.

A significant opportunity lay in restoring the continuous strip window – typical of 1960s architecture – faithfully and entirely, maintaining its original proportions and rhythm across the full length of the facade.

How did you proceed?

Our initial response was to open up the space as much as possible, questioning whether any zones really needed to be closed off – and if so, which ones. Ultimately, we made a radical choice to leave everything open, enclosing only the bathroom.

Rather than creating a distinct bedroom, we focused on the bed as a functional element – ephemeral and compact – and placed it where the pantry once was. It now sits like a cocoon, or a small cabin, at the same level as the window ledge. A long curtain track clearly defines the sequence of spaces: storage, sleeping area, entry and bathroom, forming a kind of visual backdrop that houses all the apartment's service functions.

By clearing the entire space of internal partitions, we were able to fully reveal the continuous strip window – which had been obscured by the previous layout. Stripping the apartment also allowed us to expose the original concrete structural columns, which we chose to leave bare as part of the overall aesthetic.

Was the design process a close collaboration with your client or were you given plenty of freedom to realise your own vision for the space?

We took time to reconsider the relationship between the user and the spaces – not in terms of surface area, but in terms of function, usage and even objects. The client gave us complete creative freedom to explore and refine these ideas. It was a trusting and open collaboration from start to finish.

(Right)

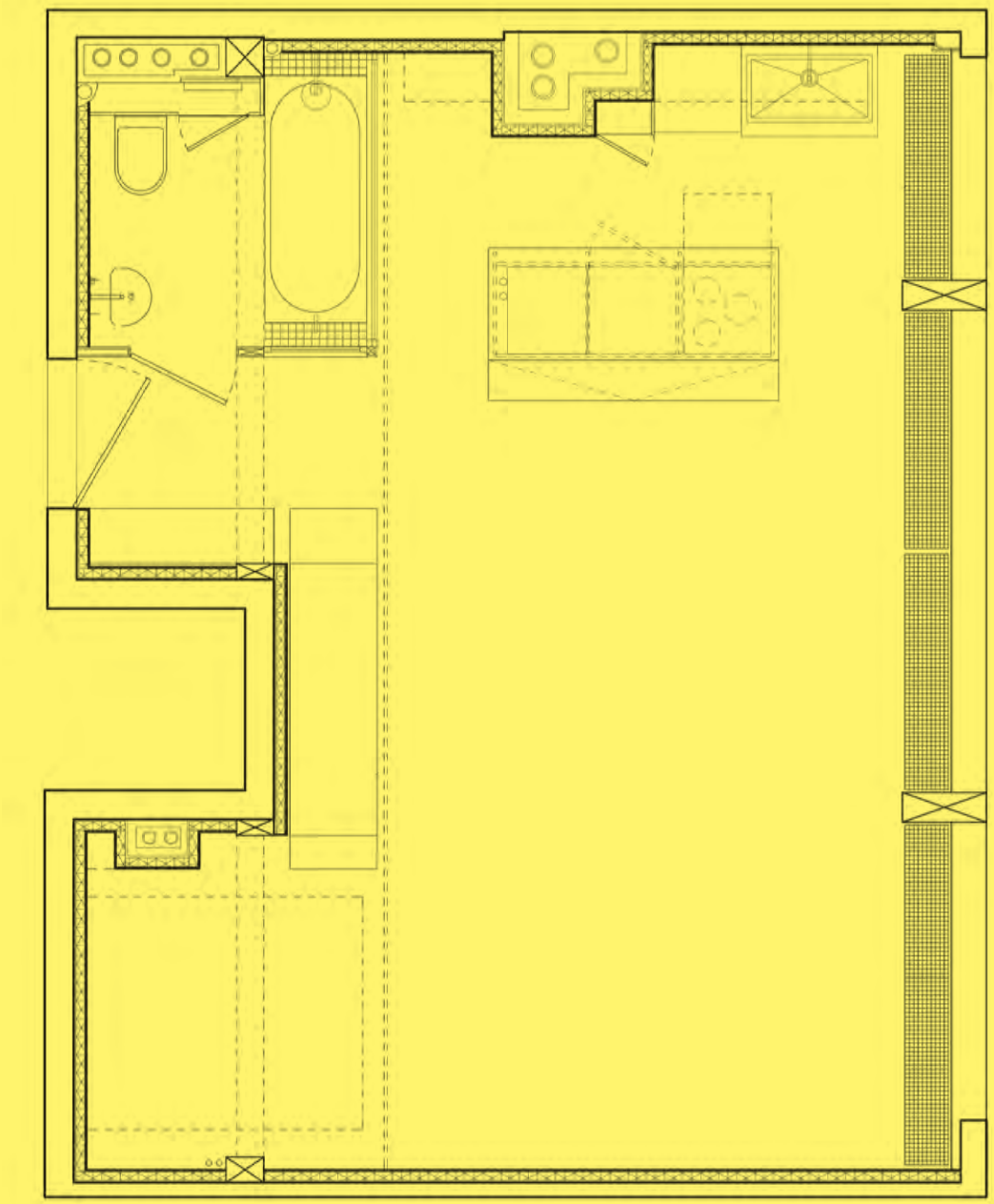
Aiming to "decolonise" the space, appartement rhin's open-plan layout is designed to feel spacious whilst also maintaining the "warmth of a lived-in space".

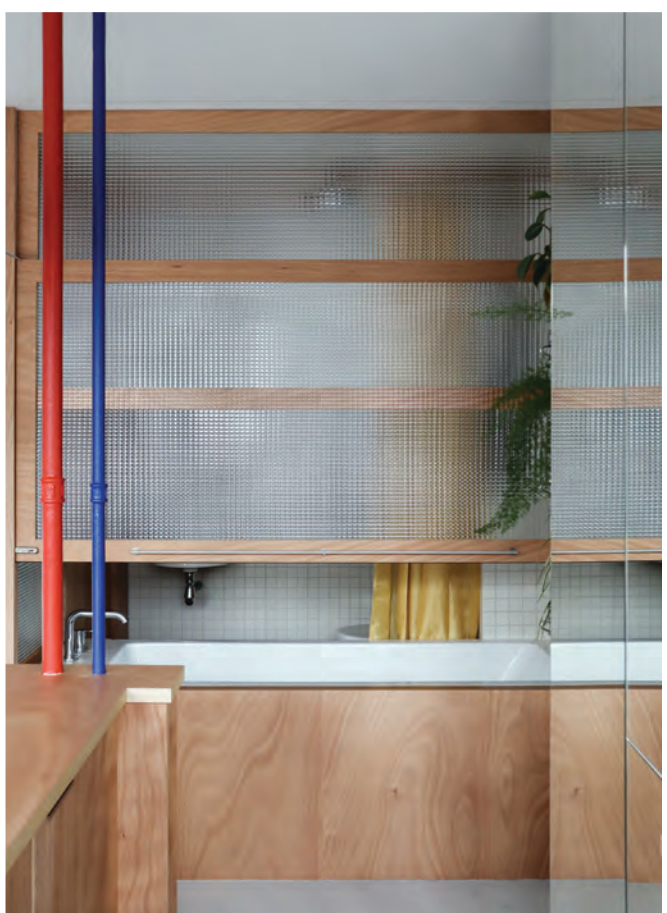
(Far right)

Opening up the kitchen and living space by removing all internal partitions means the entire apartment can benefit from the continuous strip window and its single source of natural light.

(Right)

The bedroom, storage units, entrance and bathroom that form a long strip along the back of the apartment, can all be neatly concealed behind a silver curtain.





(Left)

The apartment's standout features - the bathtub and its large sash window - are tailored to the owner's love of bathing and are designed to support both private and more social modes of this ritual.

What were the most important things to your client in the design?

Striking the right balance between the formal austerity of an open-plan layout and the warmth of a lived-in space. Wood – specifically okoume plywood – played a key role in achieving this equilibrium, creating a striking contrast with the neutral concrete floor, the expansive glazing, and the metallic curtains.

Was the bath sash window your idea or theirs? Was the bathing experience something they especially wanted to be elevated in the design?

The idea emerged through conversation with the client. When he shared his love for outdoor bathtubs and the comfort they bring, we proposed bringing that sensation indoors. The large sash window helps create the illusion that the tub is detached from the bathroom – a delicate object seemingly placed within the living space.

As the design evolved, the ability to enjoy a bath while chatting with someone cooking nearby or relaxing in the living room became one of the apartment's standout, unconventional features. Being the only enclosed space, the bathroom was treated with great care – designed as a glazed cabin, with textured glass that transforms it into a glowing lantern by night.

Talk us through your choices of materials throughout and why these choices were made.

Our material palette aimed to strike a balance between industrial clarity and domestic warmth. Metallic elements – curtains, shelving, lighting – were paired with warm wood finishes and textured glass to create a tactile, contrasting harmony. It's a dialogue between raw functionality and soft intimacy.

Where did the idea for the silver curtain come from?

The curtain was designed to define the sleeping, storage, entry and bathroom areas. It provides privacy when needed, conceals clothing and offers full blackout for restful sleep. We quickly gravitated towards a metallic solution – something that wouldn't darken the space and would help reinforce the feeling of openness. The reflective quality of the metallic finish enhances the room's brightness by bouncing light throughout the space. In reality too, the curtain is a basic thermal liner – an affordable, technical and lightweight solution that suited our needs perfectly.

And please enlighten us about the lovely blue and red pipes and the elegant recessed runner for the curtain. How did these details come about?

The red and blue pipes are part of the building's central heating system. Originally concealed within a wall lining, they were the only elements that couldn't be moved or removed. We chose to embrace them by painting the cold and hot water pipes in blue and red respectively. As for the recessed runner: we completely insulated the apartment from the inside, mainly due to the poor acoustic insulation of the building's floors. This internal lining provided the opportunity to embed the rail.

This is not the first time you've worked with a small space. How does your approach to working with small spaces like this apartment differ from your larger projects?

We began our practice working on small-scale projects. They raise very direct questions of use, ergonomics, and what is essential or superfluous. These questions now guide all our work, even at larger scales. Small spaces force you to interrogate what's truly needed to create a memorable and comfortable environment. This notion of necessity remains central to our process. It encourages us to invent technical and functional solutions through design and to create devices that improve daily life.

What kind of life is lived within these walls?

A peaceful, serene life – a minimal, orderly and intentional one.

And what is your favourite detail in the apartment and why?

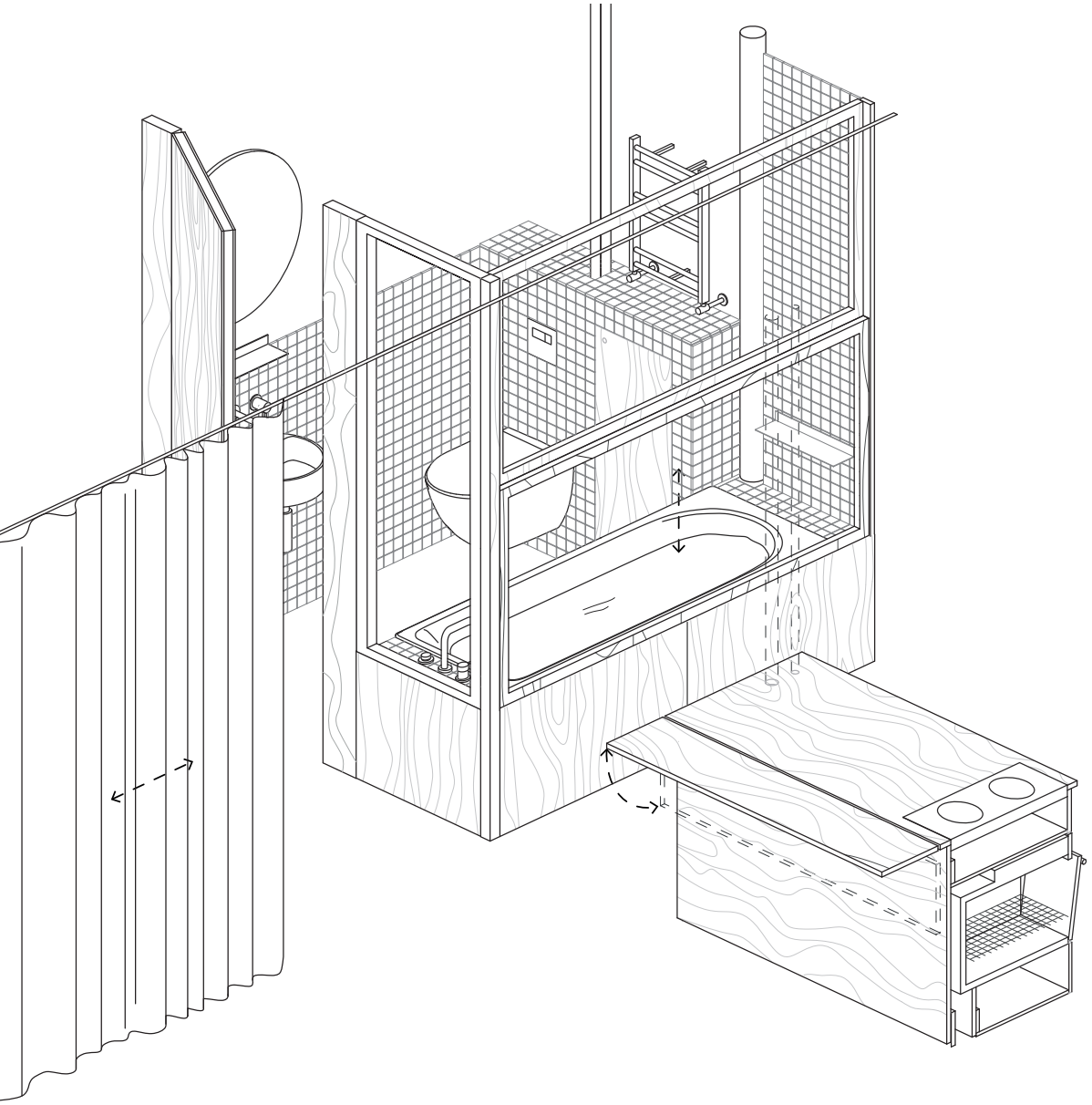
The bathroom window remains our favourite element – because of its size, elegance and beautifully simple mechanism.

(Below)

Flexible features found in appartement rhin such as its fold up breakfast bar and silver curtain are designed to promote both openness and adaptability throughout the space.

(Right)

Bringing the outdoors in: when open, the sash window allows unfiltered natural light (and perhaps even conversation and a glass of wine) to pass through to the bathtub.



Vivamati's "romantic, Roman and available" design is located in a building that dates back to the 1680s.

Project: Casa Vivamati
Design: 02A
Size: 30 sqm/323 sqft
Location: Rome, Italy

INTERVIEW ELOÏSE LACHICORÉE
IMAGES GIULIA NATALIA COMITO

Rooted in Rome's rich historic and modern architectural landscape, near the central Colosseo area, Casa Vivamati reflects this historic and modern duality in its design. Tucked away in a building dating back to 1680, here you'll find restored 18th century exposed wooden beams juxtaposed with a powder blue lacquered, multi-functional 'CUBE' that harmonises old with new. Architects Thomas Grossi and Marco Rulli – cofounders of 02A – bring a characterful approach to small footprint living, centring Casa Vivamati's design around this hard-working cube and side-stepping an all-white minimalist aesthetic "to stimulate and keep interest alive" within the diminutive apartment.

Colour brings a sense of delineation and interest to what was originally destined to be an all-white minimalist space.

Tell us about the 'CUBE', its various components and their functions.

The CUBE is the heart of the project and the apartment's central element. Lying to one side of the square floor plan, the CUBE encloses the bathroom and serves a different function on each of its faces. The side that faces the apartment's entrance features a bookcase which also functions as the hidden door into the bathroom that is housed inside the CUBE. The bathroom's entrance isn't visible from the rest of the apartment, offering added privacy. The side in front of the living room serves as storage space, with a closet and space for a washing machine inside. Finally, the third side that faces the kitchen provides a pantry area and storage space for kitchen and cooking supplies.

(Above)

The juxtaposition of the exposed wooden beams and the sleek central cube reflect the apartment's context - Rome's unique blend of old and new.

Why did you decide to centre the design around the 'CUBE'?

When considering the distribution of the space in an open-plan apartment, it's necessary to define specific spaces, identify rooms and hierarchise the relationships these spaces have with each other. With little space available to us in Casa Vivamati, we decided to build only one central element: the CUBE, which lying to one side of the apartment's square floor plan, creates three distinct functional zones: the entrance, the living and relaxation area and the kitchen.

What were the client's wishes and vision for the space?

The client's initial vision for the small studio apartment was linked to both his personal experience having lived in the apartment for a period of time, and his desired use for the property – renting to medium and long-term tenants. Based on the apartment's small size, the client also wanted to opt for a minimalist look, both in terms of space and colour which would, in his opinion, offer a broader and more functional perception of the environment.

How did these wishes evolve during your collaboration?

During the design phase, led by project manager Alessia Fuda, we tried to convey to the client that opting for a minimalist colour palette, based on the idea that "white expands space", was not the only way to approach the design of a small apartment.

> Instead, we suggested incorporating a series of small interior design details and colourful, quirky elements with their own personality to stimulate and keep interest alive; even within a very small space. The richness of the materials, shapes, colours and finishes offers the identity and quality that small footprint living deserves.

What makes this project different from the others you've worked on?

Like all of our projects, the design phase is quite a long and thorough process. This particular project required extra attention to detail due to the apartment's small size, which is definitely something that sets it apart from the others we've worked on. The project from start to finish lasted five months, with three months of design plus two months of renovation onsite.

Apart from the exposed wooden beams hidden underneath the false ceiling, were there any other unexpected features or details you discovered during the renovation?

During the renovation works, we discovered a little inlet that probably once housed a fireplace. We decided to expose this niche feature and exploit its peculiar pointed shape by adding doors with an elongated upwards point to create an atypical built-in cupboard space.

On your website, you quote the Russian theatre director Stanislavski who said, "There are no small parts, only small actors." in reference to Vivamati. How does this quote relate to the project?

This quote refers to the idea that the value of an architect, as well as that of an actor, is assessed not on the size of the project or the role played, but rather in the quality they express in their work. We chose this quote based on the fact that this is the smallest project we've worked on.

How did you arrive at the kitchen's final design and finishes? Can you describe some of its features and the intentions behind them?

The idea of using a single-block, modular kitchen unit, with storage units, came from wanting to keep the kitchen's functional identity as an essential and standalone element of the apartment. We opted for an IKEA modular kitchen model from their most economical line and also added a joinery structure to the unit that embraces and surmounts the kitchen itself.

How did you and your client land on the apartment's chosen colour palette?

Although the client originally wanted to adopt a minimalist colour palette with lots of white, during the design phase we arrived at the shared decision to choose a colour palette with light tones that welcome shades like powder blues and desaturated reds, bringing character and life into the space.

(Above)
The "living and relaxation area" in the apartment becomes its sleeping space when required. Wall-mounted lighting and flexible, practical and visually light furniture help to keep the space ordered and adaptable for these different modes.

Measuring only about 1.3 square metres, the bathroom's design is colourful, sleek and modern.

(Above)
The bathroom features a white ceramic countertop sink (designed by Flaminia) set on a custom-made iron top and integrated towel rail. Both the mirror and countertop's terracotta colour was chosen to match the kitchen's tile joints.

Can you talk to us about some of the apartment's material choices and finishes you selected and the reasons behind them?

The matte lacquers of the powder blue joinery complement the original and exposed wood beam ceiling and add a 'living' dimension to the wood itself. The neutral porcelain tile floor, on the other hand, remains deliberately subdued and adds value in its durability and practicality. The white walls also enhance the vibrant colours of the apartment's furniture and furnishings.

In what ways does the city of Rome influence and inspire your work as architects?

Needless to say, Rome represents a constant source of inspiration, not only because of its extraordinary artistic and architectural heritage, but especially because of its contrasts: the way in which these contrasts interact with one another and how, often, they find ways to coexist harmoniously.

What are your favourite features of Vivamati?

Definitely the apartment's spatial complexity. Although the original apartment was a square-shaped open-plan space, the addition of the central CUBE created several well-defined functional zones, which made the space more complex and turned 30 square metres into a home.

THIS IS YOUR HOME NOW. AN INTERVIEW WITH ILLUSTRATOR EMILIE SETO

INTERVIEW HARRISON COOK

In the illustrated cityscapes of Emilie Seto, bridges bend without breaking, skyscrapers stretch side to side, and busy city-goers trudge to their next destination. Based out of Marseille, France, Seto translates the port city's unique qualities to her own work. Cars are their own characters: parked at odd angles, skirted up on rounded curbs, and occasionally on fire; all of which emulate her experience of city life. ("Marseille is pretty much dominated by cars and messiness, which intensifies traffic in its streets.") Seto has also applied her distinctive lens to several cities in China during multiple residencies there, but whichever the city, her work is distinguished by an interest in the ordinary and a flair for translating city scenes into something extraordinary.

(Above)

Emilie Seto, the Marseille-based illustrator. Image: Jeremy Toussies, 2024.

(Page 094)

Shenyang la nuit, China, 2023. © Emilie Seto

(Right)

Le Canet, Marseille, 2023.
© Emilie Seto

What draws you to urbanity as a major theme in your work?

I began to draw Marseille for training purposes only at first, but seeing the reactions of the Marseillais to my drawings encouraged me to do more. The more I drew Marseille or other cities, the more I noticed and understood things about them. Drawing landscapes is way less intrusive than drawing people who live in it, as I sometimes draw very sketchy places in my city. I feel that telling the stories of these people is not up to me as my life is very different from theirs, and I don't want to scavenge on their lives. I prefer the pride of being able to say some of the landscapes I've drawn in Marseille were probably never drawn before.

What artists do you draw inspiration from?

I am quite inspired by illustrators like Benoît Guillaume or Yann Kebbi, or painters like Henry Darger or Cranach. But in fact, I really began to draw with manga artists like Eiichiro Oda (One Piece) or Takehiko Inoue (Slam Dunk) when I was a kid, as I am half Japanese and manga was the only thing I could see at the time coming out of my father's country. At the time, [manga] was not considered a 'good art' and for a very long time I was quite embarrassed by this artistic lineage. I've learned, as years go by, to embrace the legacy of these incredible artists. Even though my current drawings don't look 'manga' anymore at all, it's still burned somewhere in my brain as my first aesthetic.

How has your time living in cities influenced your work?

I have not lived in many cities in fact. I was born in Lyon and then moved to Marseille almost eight years ago. I haven't travelled much during my adult life. It's only been a few years since I've traveled to China for work purposes. As clichéd as it sounds, these Chinese trips deeply changed me, as they showed me I could actually have a more international career. This moved me as an Asian person growing up in the West with a very distorted vision of the Asian continent.

(Above)

Priyanka Chopra, Financial Times, 2021.
© Emilie Seto.

(Right)

Shenyang, China, 2023.
© Emilie Seto

Sakakint, Marseille, 2021. © Emilie Seto

Father and daughter, 2022. © Emilie Seto

Can you describe the moment you realised you were an artist?

I, in fact, define my practice more as an illustrator rather than as an 'artist' as my work revolves a lot around commissions for editorial purposes or for commercial work. However, as I began to draw, my adopted city, my style suddenly took a turn around the end of 2019, beginning of 2020. As I was drawing parts of my city, people from Marseille were sending me messages to tell me how they loved to see [the city] through my eyes, or that they were touched to see the neighborhoods where they grew up being dignified on paper. I don't know if I can say I realised I was an artist at this period, but it certainly changed my whole life and gave me a strong identity as an illustrator. In 2022, one Marseillais told me "tu es chez toi ici" (roughly translated as "this is your home now"), and this was, I think, the very moment where I fully realised I was adopted as an artist by my city.

What's the creative process from conception to completion for one of your works?

I've been working a lot with pencils for my landscape drawings (which are my 'personal pieces') because I like the vividness of the colors, and the fact you could either (pretty much) smash them on the paper to have a very thick deep line or sharpen them to have the thinnest line you can ever get with any tool. I usually begin from one side of the sheet to the other, from left to right, in fact, as I hold my pen with my right hand and don't want to smear the colors by rubbing it on the paper. I was inspired to choose this medium by some of my drawing heroes: Lorenzo Mattotti, Yann Kebbi, among others. Now I am getting a bit tired of this very slow and energy-consuming tool, and using more and more felt pens to draw landscapes. I usually take several pictures of one place and then 'mix' them into one final image, which creates this sense of mashed perspectives.

Where have you exhibited your work? Who have you collaborated with?

My work has been exhibited in France, New York and China. I've collaborated with a lot of magazines and newspapers, including the Financial Times and the French newspaper Le Monde. I think my Financial Times collaborations were the ones I am the most proud of as it felt like a kind of marathon with a drawing due almost every week. The articles were all written by celebrities talking about their favourite things to shop for. I had some incredibly proud moments when some of them asked me if I could send them a print of my drawing (including a message from Michelle Pfeiffer's agent, among others). I've also drawn stamps for the French Post, for the Olympique de Marseille (my city's soccer team), and for the Palais de Tokyo (a Parisian contemporary art museum). One of my proudest commissioned works is the collaboration I did with 19M (a multidisciplinary cultural space conceived by Chanel), which involved turning my drawing into a participatory embroidery experience with the public during a large event in Marseille.

Tell us about your residency in China and the inspiration behind the richly layered and colourful scenes you crafted there.

In 2023, I stayed for two months, both in Chengdu (south-west of China) and the Dongbei region (north-east), for a series of exhibitions held by French-China cultural-diplomatic projects. During my time there, my schedule was free so I could walk wherever and whenever I wanted. It was pretty dreamy, to be honest. I drew around 60 images of China (mostly at home in France from pictures) that were exhibited again in 2024. Then I returned to China this year for a one-month residency in both Shenyang and Fuzhou. It truly felt like my brain and my heart could explode. The volume of information and the range of landscapes (from thick luxurious forest to industrial desert) I got from these trips was completely insane – not like anything I had experienced in my whole life. I published a small book, Il y avait une montagne avant (Once upon a time, there was a mountain), which is a compilation of the best of my drawings from this period.

What's next for you?

I'd love to work more with Asia, especially Japan and China. Considering the series of exhibitions I've had since the beginning of 2023, I'd like to slow down a bit with work now, though. I don't have any big events planned for the future, but the situation can drastically change in a few months with this kind of work.

emilieseto.com

(Left)
Shenyang, China, 2023.

FLOORS APART

AN INTERVIEW WITH BOGDAN GÎRBOVAN

In 2008, a student submitted an audacious collection of photographs as his final thesis at the Bucharest National University of Arts. At first, this collection did the rounds in artistic circles but it wasn't long before it found its way onto social media. Since that time, *10/1* "goes viral" two or three times a year. These portraits of contrasting lives lived, in essentially the same space, but on a different floor of the same building, quickly captured the attention of architects, sociologists and everyone in between. Seventeen years later, we are just as captivated and are delighted to have learned more about the origins of *10/1* and the artist behind the camera: Romanian photographer, **Bogdan Gîrbovan**.

9th Floor

8th Floor

7th Floor

6th Floor

5th Floor

4th Floor

3rd Floor

2nd Floor

1st Floor

What is it about 10/1 that still fascinates people 17 years on, do you think?

I have gathered many layers of answers and questions, mostly from people who were touched by my work. One of the beautiful evolutions of the work has been that it seems to answer questions for people and organisations about how people live in apartment blocks. Just like a piece of classical music (let's say Bach, which I like) or like a good book that still manages to impress after many years, I am glad that 10/1 manages to touch on the ideas of convenient housing, domesticity of living, and the safety and privacy of the home in the collective memory. It has done this for quite a while, despite the fact that photography nowadays is consumed at an impressive speed.

The photographs taken are of your neighbours and their homes within your building at that time. Can you describe what prompted you to begin the series? What interested you?

Yes, the photos are taken in the apartment block where I lived, on the 10th floor, and the series includes images of the neighbours' houses vertically. The middle apartment in the arrangement of the five apartments on each floor was a studio, the smallest apartment (about 32 square meters), which included a small hallway leading to the main room, the bathroom on the right of the hallway and a small kitchen reached from the room. I started with my studio, a kind of self-portrait, then I continued with the studio on the ninth floor and I eventually reached the first floor.

In my third year of my bachelor's degree – towards the end if I remember correctly – we had to submit to the head of the department a synopsis – a draft, an idea – of what we wanted to do for our final thesis. At that time I was very fond of interior photography. I was reading an article on spatial anthropology Naming The Rooms written by Maria Vittoria Giuliani that fuelled my curious spirit about how people adapt their homes. I was pretty determined that for my final thesis I would photograph interiors of my neighbours' apartments so I submitted a draft, rather uninspiringly named Photographs of the Neighbors, to the school. I didn't have a clear concept, I didn't know who to start with (the relations with the neighbours were not the closest – we respected each other, we greeted each other but we didn't sit around talking). We were not a community in that 10-storey building with five apartments on each floor.

I started my fourth year in college, my final year, and I still hadn't managed to outline anything on the project – just some self-portraits in my own space, from several angles and promises from some neighbours. And as it happens in life, when I got tired of searching or convincing, Mrs Bita, the neighbour below me (on the ninth floor), came and asked me to help her. She had a door that creaked very loudly and it needed to be taken off its hinges, so I instantly accepted the offer to go into her home. This was the trigger to start the series – when I walked into a space identical to my own but which was totally different.

Already in the back of my mind I had the idea of going down to the first floor through these studio flats: the play between identity and identical, the architecture of the space as a convenient dwelling (being only one room, it was very cheap to live in). Many ideas were running through my mind in those few minutes while I was greasing Mrs Bita's door. In the picture of the ninth floor at Mrs. Bita's, the oil used for the door is on the table. You can see that I took the picture right after I finished the task.

As for my interests, they were manifold, starting with the idea of identicality and identity, that repetition from 10th floor to first floor, right through the whole history of photography, or at least a fairly consistent part of it.

Can you describe the building where you were all living and how it relates to the typical typology of buildings in Bucharest?

> It was a 10-storey apartment building in a neighbourhood, not very central but not very peripheral, built and put into use in 1967. The building was a Soviet pattern of apartments built in the 'golden age' in which people were moved from rural areas to cities to support industrialisation.

The information and statistics found in 2008 was that 60 to 70 per cent of the blocks in Bucharest had this purpose. Bucharest – this 'little Paris' – still has a wonderful historical centre and many buildings with great architecture, but most of the inhabitants lived and still live in Soviet-style blocks. A strange combination.

MRS BITA, THE NEIGHBOUR BELOW ME (...) CAME AND ASKED ME TO HELP HER. SHE HAD A DOOR THAT CREAKED VERY LOUDLY AND IT NEEDED TO BE TAKEN OFF ITS HINGES, SO I INSTANTLY ACCEPTED THE OFFER TO GO INTO HER HOME. THIS WAS THE TRIGGER TO START THE SERIES – WHEN I WALKED INTO A SPACE IDENTICAL TO MY OWN BUT WHICH WAS TOTALLY DIFFERENT.

What struck you in examining these contrasting versions of the same space?

The arrangement of an intimate space, a home, says a lot about the person who lives there, the decor 'does not lie' so to say – it shows you as you are. It defines you as a person, as a character. But the inanimate things don't impress me, no matter how sensational or how different the spaces may be. It's people who get into that sphere, so what struck me most was the fact that it was the most difficult to collaborate with young people. One of them even asked me for money, and yes, I gave him 50 lei – I'll let you discover which one it is. The money is in the photograph.

What story do you think these images tell?

On one hand these images are a deconstruction of a block's middle section, from the 10th floor to the first floor, and on the other hand they are a horizontal reconstruction, where the identical frame (I'm talking about the type of photographic framing) and the identical architecture (identical floor structure) meet the identity of the individual who is 10 times different.

> I think the series tells 11 stories. It's the big story where you can look at the ensemble, seeing all 10 at once, where the social mix is wholesome through its aesthetics and the footprint left by the individual, or you can look at the story cell by cell and navigate through 10 different worlds, trying to make a psychological profile of the person who lives there.

What subjects and themes are you drawn to in your work and why?

When I was an MA student, a curator and art critic told me that my style should be called 'Applied Social Photogenie'. My practice explores images that break out of the patterns of contemporary aesthetic over-saturation. I like to categorise my subjects through personal narratives and explore the relationship between people and nature in the simplest way possible.

What led you to photography?

In 1998, when I was in my third year of high school, I went on a school trip to the north of Romania, where we visited and travelled for about a week. A few days after returning, many of my fellow students were exchanging postcards: 10 by 15 centimetre photos of this trip, much like Instagram now. And I not only didn't appear in the pictures, but I didn't have many of the memories. This was very strange for me, not because I didn't appear in the pictures, but because I could not exchange memories with the others (like I had nothing to post).

There were also a lot of images that I simply didn't remember, and that contributed to my ambition to get a camera. I realised that I have problems with my photographic memory, as I couldn't remember many places, it seemed like I walked with my eyes closed. So I started taking pictures with a very cheap point-and-shoot camera, on black and white Azo Mures film (a Romanian brand of film) and I would develop them at home in the bathroom and enlarge them on black and white paper. In 2000, when I finished high school, I was the only one who was still doing photography, not colour photos that everyone took to the lab, but black and white, and I had my own darkroom at home. I was the happiest young man in the world.

I studied mathematics, physics and computer science in high school and it took me three years to find myself, to see what I like to do. I failed to get closer to anything as concrete as university studies but I was still taking pictures. I even advanced – I had a Canon eos 1000 camera, quite modern, but to my shame I didn't know about the existence of the Photography Department at the Bucharest National University of Arts. A good friend told me that this school existed, and from 2003 to 2004 I learned everything they required in the curriculum as well as I could. It was a complex exam, with charcoal drawing, an interview, photography dossier and practical photography. I wanted so much to go to this school that I prepared very well, so out of 14 places I secured the seventh place.

Since 2004 and until my last days on this planet I will do art photography. I hope to evolve with it and leave behind what every creator wants: a timeless body of works that emit a state, an emotion – something that makes you think.

girbovan.ro

UNPICKING THE PRACTICE OF BERTJAN POT

WORDS HARRISON COOK

Bertjan Pot's approach to design and art making is one of consistent curiosity and exploration. As a designer, he questions how physical items fit together, while, as an artist, he is driven by the impact his final forms have on the viewer.

Pot's practice is active, disciplined and highly dexterous, so it seems only fitting that his studio in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, had a former life as a gymnasium. Here, in this expansive environment, each design and in-progress prototype has its own dedicated space to breathe into its full vision. As if in a laboratory, Pot learns from each experiment and then iterates or evolves. Unconventional materials are tested against unconventional applications. New colour combinations emerge. And sometimes experiments give way to general play. "In all cases, I tend to like colours that clash. I love it when an individual colour gets stronger because it is presented next to another colour that is from a completely other world. I like dark next to light, bright next to dull and colours next to each other from the opposite side of the colour wheel," Pot says. This approach is most evident in his fibre work, consisting of masks, gloves and now kites.

Picture Pot sitting at his desk, working with a heavy rope-like material, testing its properties and foldability. The end goal is a rug meant for a large seating area, but the material keeps bending and protruding at its seams. It's here where Pot leans into the folding and creates the first iterations of his masks. Now, these masks are a daily part of his art-making process. When he finds himself creatively stuck or in need of a change of pace, he will go to 'the mask room' of his studio, sit at a sewing machine, and whip out a piece in no time. So much of prototyping for manufacturers is time-consuming and (at times) tedious work. To Pot, mask making is a respite – a sort of lane-change – where energy is regained and harnessed, and satisfaction is achieved, in the making of a single 'product' in an afternoon. Since 2010, he's worked with plains of bright colours swirled in the woven texture of the masks. Neon or black stitching binds edges and holds their form. Optic patterns draw the viewer's eye inward (in many cases with a confusing cocktail of benign menace). One mask in particular, patterned in an orange and grey orbital stripe, two eye holes appear in a gentle protrusion at its centre. A sort of face-like mound. As the viewer, it seems we are to bridge the gap of these absent features. Where major landmarks of the face do feature in Pot's masks, they are abstracted, allowing the viewer to ascribe their own meanings, moods and even narratives to the fibre characters.

"[The masks] can tell their own story, and probably that story is different for every viewer. I think the story that is sparked in your own head is much more powerful than that of the maker," Pot says. "When I make something (a mask or anything else), I always have several stories, and I know it's going well if the different stories of the same product start to contradict each other. So, I don't talk about what I see in them, I would much rather hear what you think they are," Pot says.

Here's a happy blue face with squinting eyes, a bent clown smile, rosy cheeks and big pink ears ... Here's a pensive face with a furrowed brow, long chin and head, made out of a charcoal brown cord juxtaposed against a white ivory nose ... Here's a sad face featuring bright and dark colors, frowning through turquoise cheeks with symmetrical eyes, Mickey Mouse ears, and orange citrus tears.

"The possibilities are endless. I'm meeting new faces every day."

Pot's mask project is always ongoing, leading to different iterations and forms. In 2010, two masks featured more tubular builds, elongating the human head. If we were to position a model for Pot's masks, the model's eyes would look out of the mouth of the tall form. This expression of Pot's masks resurfaces in his 2020, 2021 and 2022 editions. Here, the eyes blend with the bridge of the nose. Neon coloured rope ripples out from this viewpoint, clashing into the horizontal stripes of alternative colours to the top of the head. Ears the size of a field mushroom adorn either side, curling inward. Some masks even have detached earlobes with little playing dice attached – a suggestion of an earring.

In 2021, Pot broke out of his polypropylene rope and polyester yarn comfort zone and created his own fibre using grass found around his studio. Pot writes: "I really enjoy a good, precisely made hand-coiled basket, but when I have to make it myself, I know I get very impatient if the process is too slow and repetitive. So, I allowed myself to be very sloppy and fast, which resulted in these characters. There are only a few of them yet, because I am restricted by the harvesting season (winter), and they also take a lot longer to make than their synthetic rope cousins." The grass is first dried to a crisp tan before it is coiled and connected by Pot's colourful stitches. From there, the natural fibre masks are adorned with beadwork, a pom-pom hairline, or perhaps a fluffy goatee. In 2022, Pot returned to making masks out of synthetic materials with a new zest for forms, including doilies shaped with citron eyes, angry eyebrows, and glasses with skulls in place of lenses.

(Left page)
Inspiration came for Pot's mask-making when the stitched rope he was working with began to curve stubbornly during material experimentations. Image: Marjolein Fase.

(Above left)
One of Pot's earlier pieces from his Ropemasks series. Image: Marjolein Fase.

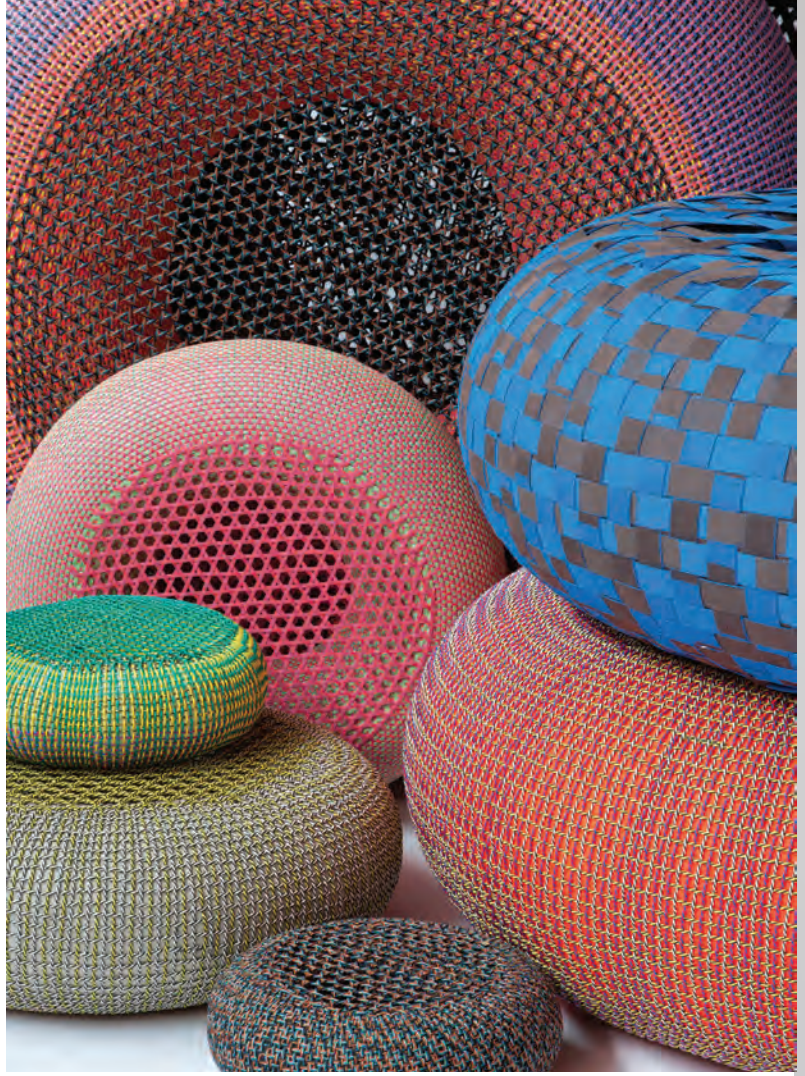
(Below)
A design from the Grass Masks collection (2021). Image: Marjolein Fase.

(Page 117)
Pot in 'the mask room' of his studio. Image: Jan Bijl.

Image: Jan Bijl.

While the relationship between the humble basket and Pot's pieces might not be immediately apparent, the construct of the woven basket is deeply influential and instructive in much of his work. When it comes to a woven basket, its materiality, texture, and functionality directly influence form. A basket with the purpose of holding fresh vegetables must be reinforced for heavy-duty yields. A basket with the purpose of holding grain needs to have more frequent stitching, so no grain leaks out of its vessel. A basket with the purpose of holding spools of thread doesn't need such strength or repetition in the seams. "I like things where texture becomes a structure that becomes a shape that becomes an object – in the same way that a fibre becomes a thread that is knitted into a sweater," Pot says.

This evolution from texture to structure to shape to object can be seen in Pot's product design work, not least in his breakout work, *The Random Light* (2002). Three years of prototyping all started with glass yarn that was soaked in clear resin, then wrapped around inflated balloons. Once it had hardened (and the balloons were removed), a sphere of clear, random coils remained, ready to cocoon a lightbulb. Lit up and suspended from a ceiling, *The Random Light* invokes a nebulous effect, drawing any viewer into its orbit. The prototype design was later picked up and manufactured by Dutch interior design brand Moooi, where it went 'mainstream', gracing galleries and high ceilings from Europe to New York and beyond.



In 2016, Pot was invited to design objects for the NIKE exhibition 'The Nature Of Motion' at Milan Design Week. He came up with the idea of *Resting pods*, an organic shape with netting on the inside to promote comfort and relaxation for visitors. "A net seemed to be a very 'Nike thing' to rest on because of its lightweight structure and minimal material," Pot writes. While prototyping, he began weaving ropes and laces around inner tubes and he used hand-weaving basket principles like coiling and triaxial weaving to push the boundary of fibre placement within the lightweight constructions.

(Above left)
The Random light for Moooi.
Image courtesy of Moooi.

(Above right)
Resting pods for NIKE at Milan Design Week in 2016. Image: Marjolein Fase.

After making masks from synthetic rope and yarn for years, Pot began using grass for his designs in his 2021 Grass Masks collection. Image: Marjolein Fase.

Since 2010, Pot has been designing masks as a part of his ongoing studio work. Images: Marjolein Fase.

Pot made his first set of gloves alongside his first series of masks in 2010 and his fascination for them has grown and grown. Image: Lotte Stekelenburg.

While Pot discovered his sense of play with masks, there were also gloves, which he admitted he had to take a break from. There's a steep learning curve starting with a mask and moving to a glove. While the primary function of a mask is to conceal the one plane of the face, a glove has five fingers, a top and a bottom, and five sides-to-sides, including the webbing of your hand. Gloves are a lot more work. For Pot's reimagining, neon colour and bright patterns mimic the topographical planes of a heat map. All right-handed, one glove sports a bright pink node on the centre of the back of the hand, breaking into other plains of chocolate brown, and then a cool mint. The fingers mimic the same pattern with neon stitching holding the form together. Stripes of ivory white and candy pink alternate, making the cuff of the glove. "I see the gloves as masks for your hand. Most of the time, they will probably be in their box or hanging from a nail in the wall. But if you feel like it you can take it down and wear it and see what you want to do with it. Wave? Make a fist? Hit someone?" Along the wall of 'the mask room' within Pot's studio, single gloves hang on the wall provocatively: splayed out, balled up or ready to jump like Thing from *The Addams Family*.

Pot's current fascination lies with another object, though, made uncommon by Pot's brilliant application of texture and colour. The humble kite embodies every one of Pot's interests. "They are a construction, lightweight, textile, decorative," Pot says. "Sometimes a protest and sometimes a performance." In their book titled *One Single Kite*, Pot, along with co-authors Maurice Scheltens and Liesbeth Abbenes, showcase the intense intricacy needed in making one of these structures. The book documents, step by step, the process of making your own quality kite while also displaying the long history of kites coming from Asia. One of Pot's kites, titled *deconstructed plex-box*, reinvites a traditional kite shape, adding additional panels sitting like a square and others tilted like a diamond. Some panels sport polka dots, others have checkers and swirls, and, while in the sky, it darts like a massive fish underwater, leaving two long tails whipping in its wake. Along with artists Scheltens and Abbenes, Pot is working on creating a Kite-Club presentation at the Museum Voorlinden in Wassenaar, Netherlands, where anyone can partake in flying kites and kite making.

> From baskets to kites, Pot's often finds inspiration in artists that straddle the intersection of craft and fine art. The outsider art, the folk art – the *art brut*, as some call it in certain circles – are what interest him. "It always seems so much more 'from the heart straight to the hands' and not too much [the] 'head'," Pot says.

It is this passion and pull towards the *handmade*, and thereby engagement with the micro details of his craft, that enriches the larger picture. Just as a topographical map tells us the surrounding area's elevation, Pot's approach to colour collision creates planes within planes that accent exciting forms, which he seeks to redefine. Pot's work is a masterclass in micro details adding up to a sum or in his words, "product", rendered unforgettable by his touch. The zigzag stitching from his sewing machine brings the rope cord closer together. You can see the repetition of the stitch wrapping around the cord, pulling it ever so slightly to make it stronger and durable. The juxtaposing of colour from the stitch to the rope cord creates a buzzing around the eyes, whether it's neon thread on neon rope or simply black thread on white rope. These little details pull the viewer in and greet them with something new and unexpected in otherwise familiar objects and forms. In an interview with *Dezeen* in 2022, Pot said "I love it when my hands surprise my head." It is this very sense of surprise experienced in the making that Pot gifts his audience to experience too – along with all he has explored, discovered and subverted along the way.

(Above)
The stitching process Pot uses in making his rope masks. Image: Jan Bijl

(Left)
Pot's latest fascination lies with exploring the history and reimagining the form of kites. He has recently collaborated on a book on the subject. Image: Bertjan Pot.

A bolster from the WT collection 17.
Image: Maria Ziegelböck.

Susanne Schneider and **Johannes Schweiger's** fascination with provocation takes its shape in the form of the cushion, otherwise known as 'contemporary bolstering' in the world of **WIENER TIMES**. The Austrian duo's covetable designs combine and juxtapose bold and ornate textiles, elevating the status of the mundane decorative cushion to characterful home companions. **Custom-made from their studio in Vienna, each piece brings the worlds of design, craft and art together to blur the lines between function and abstraction, and question our perception of the thing itself.**

An interview with WIENER TIMES

INTERVIEW ELOÏSE LACHICORÉE

Talk to us about your philosophy of 'contemporary bolstering'.

For us, there is far more to a cushion than just decoration – it's a carrier of stories and a field for discourse between the poles of design, art, craftsmanship and interior design. Precisely because a cushion (as an object) is often regarded as secondary or even superfluous, we are interested in this 'skewed' position opening up spaces for critical reflection on supposedly banal things and their cultural significance.

What are your backgrounds and how did you both meet?

Susanne studied tapestry at the Royal College of Art in London, while Johannes studied painting and new media at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna. We met through mutual friends during a residency in Paris – in the midst of an inspiring environment that laid the foundation for our later collaboration.

Where did the idea to start WIENER TIMES come from?

Even before WIENER TIMES was founded we worked together on various artistic projects with artistic groups like Gelatin and – fabrics interseason. Our shared passion for fabrics and textile narratives led us to develop the first ideas for WIENER TIMES almost 10 years ago. Through experimentations and research across various archives and libraries, it became clear to us that over the years a relationship between Viennese Heritage and the work that we do was emerging, from digging deep into the vast empires of ornamentation and turning to the gilded spirit of the last century for inspiration.

Where do your fabrics typically come from?

Over the years we have developed close partnerships with renowned textile manufacturers, including Kvadrat, Rubelli, Dedar, Designs of the Time, Pierre Frey, Morris & Co/Sanderson and Liberty London. Our collaboration with traditional Austrian company Backhausen, whose fabrics are deeply rooted in Viennese design history, was of particular importance to us. The opulent, colourful designs of Austrian artist Dagobert Peche or the rigid, geometric designs by architect and designer Josef Hoffmann open up new perspectives and narratives when juxtaposed with fabric designs by the aforementioned manufacturers; and they are good examples of the special character of our work.

The sad news that Backhausen was closing operations in the spring of 2023 led us to gather our resources to stock up on whatever we could of these precious textiles – a hugely important slice of Viennese heritage that would soon cease to be in production. We do, however, regularly work on smaller runs using vintage fabrics or leftover stock when working on one-off commissions.

What inspires you when it comes to your applications of colour and pattern?

Our work is like storytelling with fabric. By combining, juxtaposing and patchworking patterns and textures, we create new narrative spaces. It can be very stimulating to see a geometric Hoffmann design from the Wiener Werkstätte next to a floral William Morris pattern from the Arts and Crafts movement, or to combine a luxurious Pierre Frey tapestry with a simple gingham check. The juxtaposition of fabrics is a central part of our creative process.

(Left)

A piece from the SS21 collection in collaboration with the Austrian company Backhausen. Image: Maria Ziegelböck.

You describe your pieces as "actively questioning and pushing the lines between abstraction and function". What do you find so alluring about this tension?

We have a very precise design approach – our cushions should not be just any old rectangular sofa cushion. They should be functional, yet comfortable and inviting. This tension between formal design and utility opens up space for individual reception: for some, a WIENER TIMES cushion is a charming object in the living room, for others a faithful companion, almost a roommate with character.

Why do textiles remain your primary medium of choice?

Textiles are incredibly versatile – they can be sensual, playful, austere or opulent. They are accessible, often close to the body, tactile – and, yes, sexy. Their materiality and design are rich and complex, which makes them a fascinating medium and communication tool for us.

(Above)

Pieces from the SS25 collection. Image: Maria Ziegelböck.

(Right)

René Magritte floral-shaped cushion. Image: Maria Ziegelböck.

For their offbeat and striking collection shoots, WIENER TIMES "develop creative concepts that express [their] vision in a natural way." Image: Maria Ziegelböck.

(Above)

A piece from the SS21 collection in collaboration with the Austrian company Backhausen. Image: Maria Ziegelböck.

(Above)

Portaluppi Casa Wassermann Seat Cushions with fringing details from the SS23 Collection. Image: Maria Ziegelböck.

(Left)

The Neo Geo pillows from the SS23 collection are inspired by a David Hockney drawing, *Picasso Masks* (1974). Image: Maria Ziegelböck.

(Left)

The 'ceramic books' made in collaboration with David Jourdan. Image: Pascal Petignat.

How have your pieces and collections evolved since your first in 2017?

When we started WIENER TIMES, our Giant Hand pillows in various variations quickly became a kind of signature piece, and they still are. Over the years we have ventured into more figurative shapes and playfully expanded our repertoire.

Once a year we develop a new collection, which we present in showrooms during fashion weeks in Paris or Tokyo. We still produce exclusively to-order in our studio in Vienna – by hand, piece by piece. This principle has not changed to this day: sustainability, transparency and manageable production conditions are still very important to us. We believe that this is what makes our pieces so special. Even if certain designs are produced several times, each piece is still unique, which is something our customers really appreciate.

Unexpected, charming details often feature in your pieces, such as fringing in multiple materials, elaborate tassels, floppy 'petals' of fabric or even handles. Where does the interest in this level of detailing come from?

It is precisely because such details are often considered kitschy or 'too much' that we are interested in them. They break with convention and bring a certain lightness, even humour, into play. We see them as tongue-in-cheek quotes – a loving gesture towards the decorative, which may be frowned upon in certain circles, but which we love for that very reason.

Your pieces also feature familiar forms such as faces, flowers, hands but rendered less familiar and much more interesting by exaggerated proportions or unexpected textures and details. What draws you to return to playing with these forms?

We want to create alternatives – high quality, thoughtful alternatives to the overabundance of uniform, interchangeable cushions. At a time when resources are scarce, there is no need for yet another round or rectangular cushion. We are interested in playing with familiar shapes that appear unexpectedly 'new' because of their proportions, materials or context.

Are there other designers (contemporary or otherwise) who inspire your work?

We're particularly fascinated by the female artists of the Wiener Werkstätte such as: Mathilde Flögl, Maria Likarz and Felice Rix-Ueno. Their humorous and confident designs broke with the often male-dominated norms of their time. We are also inspired by pioneering women such as Anni Albers, Sonia Delaunay and Sophie Taeuber-Arp – all of whom worked with great clarity and visionary courage.

What do you hope people take away from interacting with your designs?

Joy – and if you buy a piece from WIENER TIMES, it might just become a long-lasting and faithful companion for your own home.

Your brand photography is always so fun and eye-catching. Where do the ideas come from?

The concept and art direction for our campaigns are created in close collaboration with our long-time friend and photographer Maria Ziegelböck. Together we develop creative concepts that express our vision in a natural way. We also rely on familiarity and authenticity when choosing our models: most of them come from our personal environment – the art and culture scene to which we feel connected. For us, they are not classic models, but testimonials – real personalities who bring our pieces to life.

Outside of your bolsters, blankets and apparel, you've dabbled in 'ceramic books'-cum-serving plates-cum-paperweights and a little furniture. What's next for WIENER TIMES?

We would say that the core of our design work still lies in the design process for textile objects. Our involvement with furniture, however, comes almost naturally from textile design, as textile elements can often be found on, under and around furniture. We are particularly interested in stools and chairs – pieces of furniture whose minimalism often calls for a certain textile supplement. We often create these in collaboration with designer friends, which is always an enriching experience for us.

The 'ceramic books', on the other hand, are a joint project with David Jourdan, the artist and publisher of Westphalie Verlag. These objects are rather irritating in their simplicity, almost a silent provocation in a private space, like when used as a trivet for an espresso machine, for example. It is this kind of irritation that fascinates us and in a way reflects our way of working: the joy of the unexpected and the reinterpretation of the everyday.

Although we might reinterpret one or two everyday objects or pieces of furniture in the future, textiles will always remain at the heart of our creative work. This is where we feel safe, where we feel at home and where our greatest passion and expertise lie.

THE MEANING OF A METRE

When it comes to architecture, it's often the small measurements and details that make the biggest difference. A few centimetres of bench space here. A metre or two there. If we want to design more connected spaces, maybe it's time to ditch the extraordinary – and get back to ordinary.

Each apartment has its own little "veranda" at 38 Albermale Street. Image: Tom Ross courtesy of Fieldwork.

WORDS JAMES SHACKELL

For about four years in my late 20s, I lived in a variety of what might tentatively be called 'modern apartments'. These were basically white oblong-shaped boxes, very dark, very small and uniformly uniform, with high-spec dishwashers and low-spec everything else.

In one of them, my partner and I shared a bedroom with no external windows whatsoever, only a thin strip of cheap glass near the ceiling, which – if you stood on a chair – offered unparalleled views of the living room.

In another, we discovered that the bathroom fan wasn't actually attached to any recognisable ventilation system, and had been sucking moist shower air into a small ceiling cavity for months; a cavity which rapidly filled with mould. Soon the mould spores migrated out of the bathroom and onto our curtains, which were the only things keeping out black soot-dust from the adjacent main road. Between the mould and the black dust, and the top-end Miele appliances (with integrated convection stovetops) the whole place had a weird Park-Avenue-meets-Dickensian-London kind of vibe.

More worrying, though, was the overall design philosophy of these complexes. Socially speaking, they were tombs. The hallways were identical and anonymous, with zero natural light. Everyone's front door looked the same, and very firmly marked the boundary between 'public' and 'private' space. We never met, and rarely saw, a single neighbour during our entire tenancy[1]. Communal areas were limited to the lobby, which looked very expensive and vaguely hostile – the kind of place where you might be fined for loitering – and the gym, which was always empty.

Moreover, the apartments themselves had clearly been developed for developers rather than residents: the intent was to sell as *few* square feet as practicably possible, while still being able to market these as 'luxury two-bedroom apartments' (stretching the definitions of both 'luxury' and 'bedroom' to their absolute limit). There wasn't a single inch on the floorplan that signified warmth, or generosity of spirit, or made room for trivial things like human health, individual expression or genuine social connection.

As products, these apartments reminded me of a mental flip that seems to capture the fundamental decline of late-stage capitalism, to wit: "How *much* can we give our customers and still turn a profit?" somehow became "How *little* can we give our customers and still turn a profit?"

Quino Holland is an architect who's trying to reverse that flip. As the Director of Melbourne-based design studio Fieldwork, it's his mission to build apartments that people actually want to, you know, *live in*. The fundamental brief is to provide high-quality, low-cost housing, nurture community, and (in his own words) "bring real dignity to apartment living".

And the funny thing is, while words like 'dignity' sound quite lofty and nebulous on paper, the mechanics for achieving them are (almost always) small and tangible: more windows, *thicker* windows, better cross-ventilation, quality, hard-wearing materials, or public spaces with genuine utility. Even recessing a front door 30cm into the wall, creating a small alcove or doorstep, can help nurture a sense of community. Suddenly there's space for a pot plant, space for a doormat, space for neighbourliness. Just more goddamn *space*.

> ***"I think the most important tool an architect can deploy is empathy," Quino says. "It's about making sure that we're not narrowing down people's possibilities when they move into an apartment, but actually broadening them.***

"If you design apartments right, you can have kids there. You can be old there. You can have pets and mobility and friends."

1 Apart from the unfortunate time I was mindlessly walking home, brain elsewhere, got off the elevator one floor too soon and burst straight into the kitchen of a 50 year-old Chinese woman, who took one look at me and screamed. We did not become friends.

Quino knows this first-hand, because for the last eight years he's been living in a Fieldwork-designed apartment complex[2]. "It's been wonderful," he laughs, "because it means that I've got this living, breathing laboratory to experiment with."

For Quino and Fieldwork, high-density design is as much about the bits between apartments as the apartments themselves. "I'm interested in the in-between spaces," Quino admits, "like those classic walk-up apartments you get in Melbourne. The way the internal life of the apartment spills out onto the communal landings."

Fieldwork's recent development for Assemble at 38 Albemarle Street, Kensington, is full of these little 'in-between spaces'. Instead of the typical double-loaded layout, with a windowless corridor running down the centre of the building and all the apartments facing outward, Quino opted for an open-air walkway that connects the building and also splits it in half.

This did two important things. First, it generated cross ventilation for *all* the apartments, with both light and air circulating freely on both sides. Second, it created space for spontaneous community building. Small built-in bench seating encouraged people to stop and shoot the breeze with their neighbours. Pot plants started colonising the communal areas. Unlike the anonymous hallways of traditional double-loaded developments, the open-air walkway, cut through with massive vertical lightwells, provided the space for connection to grow. And grow organically.

"We gave each apartment a metre or two for its own little front veranda," Quino says. "Kind of like a classic Victorian terrace house[3] – you've got your private yard, which in this case is the balcony on one side. And then you have a little front veranda on the other; and that's a really lovely interface between private and public."

"People throw this idea of community around a lot. And you can't *design* community. But what you can do is design a building that starts fostering neighbourliness."

These little 'metre or two' spaces really add up. Small measurements are the difference between a shallow, ornamental kitchen bench and a deep, functional one. A closet where coat hangers hang as nature intended, and one where they bump against the wall. An apartment balcony with room for a planter box, encouraging pollinators and wildlife. Or even a recessed study nook, allowing the residents to work from home (potentially saving on commute time and shrinking an entire neighbourhood's collective carbon footprint).

One architect that embodied this generosity of spirit was British-American Christopher Alexander, author of *A Pattern Language*, and one of the most iconoclastic designers of the 20th century.

In his book, Alexander advocated for various 'patterns' – repetitive design rules – that (he believed) created an objectively beautiful, functional home. Things like orientating bedrooms towards the east (Pattern 138) since gently waking with the sun has always been the most natural and comfortable way to regain conciousness. Each pattern solves a particular design problem, and there are several that deal with small spaces:

- Build cosy alcoves or 'caves' into walls, so that children have somewhere to play and exercise their imagination (Pattern 203).
- Workspaces should be semi-enclosed and at least 60 square feet, to create the optimal blend of privacy and collaboration (Pattern 183).
- In major rooms, always make at least one window into a 'window place', with built-in bay seating or extra space for chairs (Pattern 180).
- Walls should be thick. Not just for thermal insulation, but so as to accommodate nooks, storage, shelves and surprises (Pattern 197).
- Windowsills should be low and broad, around 12 to 14 inches off the floor. This helps you stay connected to the garden (Pattern 222).

2 Now that I think about it, living in your own buildings should probably be mandatory for architects. Like making a chef eat at their own restaurant.
3 Melbourne's iconic Victorian and Edwardian single-fronted brick houses often feature a narrow, sheltered verandah at the front. Often no deeper than a metre. These verandahs are small, but they function as useful transitional spaces between the house and the street.

(Left + below)

The open-air walkway that both splits and connects the building at 38 Albermale Street generates cross ventilation for *all* the apartments while also creating space for spontaneous community building (and lots of plants). Image: Tom Ross courtesy of Fieldwork.

Private balconies at 38 Albermale Street. Image: Tom Ross courtesy of Fieldwork.

Quino Holland. Image: Tom Ross courtesy of Fieldwork.

(Left)

Quino's apartment building, 122 Roseneath Street, designed by Fieldwork for Assemble. Image: Tom Ross courtesy of Fieldwork.

(Left)

Rob Adams AM: a fan of the “small things”. Image: Colin Chee.

(Right)

The public chess set at Little Collins and Swanston St. Bill Bachman / Alamy Stock Photo.

Most of Alexander’s patterns approach design from a problem-solving point of view. They’re all about little things. Ordinary, unglamorous things. The gradual accretion of thoughtful conveniences that eventually add up to a better quality of life.

And the interesting thing about this philosophy is that the same principles can be amplified outwards at greater scale.

If you can design a generous room, you can design a generous apartment or a generous building. And if you can design a generous street, you can – very slowly, piece by piece – build a more connected and considerate city.

For more than 40 years, the man responsible for doing that in Melbourne was multi-award-winning architect and urban designer Rob Adams (AM).

Adams grew up in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) and earned his B Arch at the University of Cape Town in 1971. In the 1980s, he moved to Australia, specifically Melbourne, where he helped design the city’s first comprehensive urban design strategy, in which vibrant and activated streetscapes featured heavily. The general idea was that, before you can build a good city, you first need to build a really good street. Or even a good *seat*.

“I worked for the city of Melbourne for 40-odd years,” Rob says, “And some of the smaller things we did are actually the things that give me the greatest pleasure. You know, if you design a good seat, and you see people sitting in it and enjoying it. My granddaughter said to me the other day, ‘Grandad, all you do is make footpaths and plant trees’.

“And I smiled at that, because she's right. But fundamentally, that's what it's all about, isn't it?”

On a recent consulting trip to Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, Rob was asked by the government for big, show-stopping ideas – architectural wonders that would put Riyadh on the global tourism map – and he admits he was stumped. Because the question was fundamentally flawed. The Riyadh municipal authorities had fallen into a classic urban design trap: they were thinking too *big*.

The small things: *Town Heralds* (1992) a brass paving inlay project by artists Ian Dryden, Ron Jones and Philip Meldrum that Rob was behind. Image: Colin Chee.

“I mean, they asked for big ideas. and I couldn't give them a single big idea,” Rob laughs. “What I could give them was a whole lot of *small* things that they could do. Trees. Mixed-use frontage for shops. Recessed doors and windows, rather than blank walls. Public seating. They kept asking for the sensational and I kept saying, ‘No, you’ve got to think *ordinary*.’”

One of Rob’s favourite spaces in Melbourne is a small, nondescript amphitheatre on the corner of Little Collins and Swanston Street – the city’s central artery and car-free walkway. “This was always a public space,” Rob says, “but it used to have more pigeons than people. There were a couple of benches where guys drank out of paper bags. That was it.”

Rob’s solution to activate this space was to open it up, push the shop frontage back slightly, and build a few layers of tiered bench seating. That few extra metres made all the difference. With a café on the corner and more space to stretch out and people-watch, passers-by began to stop and linger. Buskers used the extra footpath space for performances. And one finishing touch really sealed the deal.

“There’s a jewellery shop next door, and when we were developing the space, the owner came out and asked if we’d considered installing a large chess set,” Rob says. “We hadn’t considered it, but I thought, ‘Yes, what a good idea’. And it turned out this store owner had a son who passed away, but when the son was working in Switzerland, he’d had a public chessboard outside his apartment window.

“I think cities and houses need to tell stories about the people who have occupied them and the people who design them. I don’t really get excited by people doing big, look-at-me projects. They’re brilliant, don’t get me wrong, but if that’s your sole purpose in life, I think it becomes a bit meaningless. I try to strive for memory and meaning.”

That’s the real meaning of a metre. In the scheme of a city, or even a building, it’s a small thing. An insignificant thing. Which is why it’s so easy for developers to overlook. But to the people who inhabit these worlds, an extra metre here or there is *incredibly* significant. It can be the difference between a space that sparks joy, or builds frustration. A street that welcomes people to linger, or encourages them to keep walking. A development that isolates people, or actively brings them together.

“Someone said the other day, ‘Oh that Rob Adams, he just does small things’,” Rob says, with a smile. “And I thought, you know, what a compliment. If only he knew.”

A SHOP OF SECRETS

There are few things more precious than a secret. The promise and trust inherent in its sharing. Shared to be held and kept. **Aamu Song** and **Johan Olin** understand all of this so keenly that they have built their entire art practice around the sacredness of secrets, travelling the world in search of them. They are secret seekers. Secret detectives. And keepers of a shop of secrets: **Salakauppa**.

WORDS ELIZABETH PRICE

Long before the ruptures of war put a stop to tourism, Aamu and Johan boarded a train at Pasila station in Helsinki bound for Russia. It was mid-winter and one of the coldest they could remember. It was hard to believe they were headed somewhere colder still. Armed with maps and a list, they huddled together in the heavily curtained carriage, consumed by nervous energy and excitement. Would they find the master craftsmen and women, and the artisan makers they were seeking? And would they convince them to share their skills and artistry with them? Would they discover The Secrets of Russia?

• • •

‘The Secret Project’, as Johan calls it, started as an offspring from an exhibition he and Aamu put on at the KIASMA (Museum of Contemporary Art) in Helsinki in 2007. “We decided to show what kinds of manufacturing and craft skills we still have in Finland,” Johan says. “We made a collection and opened a kind of a secret shop within the exhibition spaces of the museum.” The pair enjoyed the experience of working with “the makers” so much that they decided to open a real shop in Helsinki and they called it Salakauppa (Sala being ‘secret’ in Finnish and Kauppa being ‘shop’). It was a tiny, three metre by three metre kiosk (“I kind of love small everything,” says Aamu.) and since then they have continued to explore the manufacturing traditions of other countries.

(Above)

The first Salakauppa kiosk in Helsinki. Image courtesy of COMPANY.

(Below)

Masters of Matryoshka from the Secrets of Russia collection. Designed in 2019 by Aamu Song / COMPANY. Manufactured in Semenov, Russia. Image: Paavo Lehtonen.

Which country came next? “I think that was not such an adventurous story,” Johan warns. “I think Aumu was a bit homesick.” Aamu had been living in Finland for nearly 10 years at that time (she and Johan met at art school there) and so the couple decided to embark on an artist residency in her home country – South Korea. They stayed for almost six months and during this time, they produced their second collection. Then one day, when Aumu and Johan were looking at a map of the world (the couple declare maps to be their favourite thing to stare at), they suddenly realised there is only one country in between Aamu’s Korea and Johan’s Finland. Russia. And what a lot of it there was too. “And neither of us knew anything much about Russia.” So, from 2010 until the beginnings of the Russia-Ukraine war in early 2022, Aamu and Johan spent more than 300 days in the country, discovering and meeting many masters and makers who became beloved friends. For now, this part of their practice is sadly on hold.

The treasures that emerged from their time in Russia, however, still grace the shelves of their shop. Brightly coloured and exquisitely detailed, glossy wooden figures and scenes – a set of Matryoshka dolls that honours the ‘masters of Matryoshka’ themselves, a set of four delectable icecream treats, a ‘Mama Bird’ and her four greedy baby birds, and the showpiece of this collection: a model of Salakauppa itself – complete with Aamu and Johan painted at the counter and tiny customer figurines and even tinier representations of their beautiful products.

(Right)

Aamu in February 2012 in Cemenov, Russia. Image: COMPANY.

(Far right)

Aamu pictured with a 'master of Matryoshka' in Semenov, Russia. Image: COMPANY.

(Above)

Aamu with two 'masters of Matryoshka'. Image: COMPANY.

(Left)

Aamu's drawings for Mama Bird from the Secrets of Russia collection. Designed in 2018 by Aamu Song / COMPANY. Manufactured in Semenov, Russia. Illustration: Aamu Song.

(Below)

SALAKAUPPA. Designed in 2024 by Aamu Song / COMPANY. Manufactured in Semenov, Russia. Image: Paavo Lehtonen.

(Left)

The Nagano Apple from the Secrets of Japan collection. Designed in 2019 by Aamu Song / COMPANY. Made by Sunohara Toshiyuki. Illustration: Aamu Song. Image: COMPANY.

These pieces, all designed by Aamu, are joined by many others from the Secrets of Finland, Secrets of Mexico and Secrets of Japan collections. The latter contains a carved wooden container in the shape of a partly peeled red apple made by Sunohara Toshiyuki in Nagano, Japan. To be sure the design of this beautiful object was conveyed accurately (given no common language existed between the designers and maker), Aamu and Johan purchased an apple at Helsinki airport, which travelled with them to Nagano. There, they carved it to illustrate the idea and the intended shape, before dividing the fruit and eating it together.

With all the obvious barriers, I'm curious to know how Aamu and Johan manage to find their makers. Johan declares Aamu to be the "detective branch" of their operation. "It's a really difficult process," Aamu admits. "It takes a lot of love and effort." Aamu is also quick to point out that the makers do not need Salakauppa. "They don't need us but we need them." "We want to learn from them and for learning it's best to work together." These "idols" take one to two years of work and research to find. The detective work might range from scouring books to something more organic (and sequitous). "We might try to live in a certain area and then in some cafe you find a nice jar for sugar and ask 'where is this from?' and it's from some farmers market and you go there and then track them down and then you meet them and they're like 'oh we don't want to work with a foreigner' or they don't want to meet us. And then they don't have an email or anything," says Aamu.

Patience, persistence and charm are qualities Aamu and Johan clearly have in spades. Whether it's in response to those qualities or a product of pure curiosity, the 'master' eventually relents.

"When we make contact with the master, he invites us to his place and then we learn how he makes things," says Aamu. "Quite often we don't share a common language so usually we start to do something together." This act of co-making is where the foundations of trust are laid that eventually lead to the transmitting of generations old skills and knowledge – the sharing of secrets.

"We paint as he paints or carve as he carves. We [do this] maybe nearly a hundred times so it's almost like made by him or her. And then after that we make everything with this individual master in their original country. So it's like nightmare logistics," says Aamu. Beyond the language and geographical barriers that make communication challenging, some of Aamu and Johan's masters don't even have a bank account. But according to Johan, that's a "big part" of the whole project. "If it would be very easy to do it, then we probably wouldn't do it," he says.

Just as Daniel Day-Lewis is famous for his 'method acting', Aamu and Johan like to go full method too when in design mode. "I love Japan and I love Mexico and Russia. I think when I 'do a secret' I mentally give a passport of each country to myself," Aamu shares. "That's true," adds Johan. "During the research and then also during the design and development we always listen to the music from there and we cook the food from that place."

• • •

(Below left)

Aamu and Johan learning a new secret. Image: COMPANY.

(Below right)

Aamu's drawing for *Kokeshi Vendor* linked to the traditional kokeshi dolls of Northern Japan. Illustration: Aamu Song.

(Left)

Aamu learning from one of their masters. Image: COMPANY.

(Left)

Blue Bear. Designed in 2018 by Aamu Song / COMPANY. Made by Sunohara Toshiyuki. Image: Paavo Lehtonen.

Aamu grew up in “the massive big mega city” of Seoul. Her interest in designing and making beautiful things started at a formative age. “I have kept a diary – a picture diary since I was five. From 1979 until 2025.” This is where Aamu keeps a record of her ideas and inspirations. She has all of these diaries still too – with her in Helsinki. I question whether this direct visual connection to the child artist in her has anything to do with the sense of nostalgia and childlike wonder she brings to all they make and sell at Salakauppa, but Aaumu says she doesn’t look at the drawings from her childhood. This quality in her work comes from a more philosophical place. “We get too serious when we get old. I mean, I got all the education possible – possibly too much education – but I tried to keep the line of something that really makes you happy when you draw or paint.”

“I don't want to ‘clean that up’ with ‘design’,” she says. “You know, like there is ‘green washing’ I think there's ‘design washing’ too – [this idea] that something has to be ‘cool’ and serious-looking or something that makes you money.”

“I believe in something more meaningful,” says Aamu.

• • •

At the time of our conversation, Aamu and Johan have just celebrated their 15th wedding anniversary. ‘Officially’ they are sculptors and have collaborated under the banner of the design brand COMPANY since the year 2000. Our conversation takes place in their studio – “a kind of house for artists” – that they share with a number of other sculptors, painters, musicians and actors. It is strikingly sedate in its decor and colour scheme – quite the contrast to the vivid mural painted by Johan in Salakauppa. “It's a bit like a museum where we work and it's good to have a bit of contrast,” says Johan. “There are no colours in our home either. We see too much in every other place where we spend our days.” And And Salakauppa consumes most of their days and is very different than their public sculpture work. Those projects and pieces often involve collaboration with specialists from other fields where each has control over their portion of that collaboration. ‘The Secret Project’, however, has “a life of its own”. “It's not in our control,” Johan says. “It is its own adventure and we follow that trail.” He tells me that Aamu is the adventurer and always has been that force in the couple too. “I follow her around and I try to keep things somehow calm,” he smiles.

(Above left)
Satsuma. Design and drawings: Aamu Song. Photo: Paavo Lehtonen.

(Above)
Aamu pictured during their travels for the Secrets of Finland collection. Image: COMPANY.

(Left)
Johan’s “vivid mural” in Salakauppa. Image: Paavo Lehtonen.

I’m interested to know how the combination of Aamu’s South Korean heritage and Johan’s Finnish heritage feed into Salakauppa. For Aamu, having grown up in a country and culture that places great emphasis on academic achievement and hard work plays a big part. “I think I'm still a victim of that education system. I'm so hungry for learning – even now at 51.” For Johan, the cultural influence of Korea in what they do is just as strong. “Finland is quite peaceful in many many ways, compared to South Korea,” he says. “But I think what I've been charmed by and learned – and what we've definitely taken into our shopkeeping and the whole ‘secrets art project’ – is how you can run a store.”

> “In Korea you occupy every vacant space and make something happen there – whether it's commercial or some other activity – and every food is full of taste and delicious and nothing is enough and you have so many things, versus Finland where there's just a lot of empty space waiting for something to happen.”

“So I think we try to put that into practice here.”

While Johan painted the mural that brings the walls and shelves to life in Salakauppa, the colours were chosen by Aamu. She recounts a French customer saying that he felt like he was in a Mongolian yurt when he was inside the store. “That's true,” Johan nods thoughtfully. “They like orange.” “So maybe in between Korea and Finland there is some Mongolian vibe,” smiles Aamu. “It was not a reference but we wanted to put all the cultures we learned from – all the different countries and it seems it became kind of Mongolian.”

• • •

So, what defines a Salakauppa product? What makes it worthy to appear in the Secret Shop?

“It follows a tradition that we fell in love with (and kind of interfered with) and respected, but then we contributed something to that tradition,” Johan says. “So then it becomes a Salakauppa item and the shop is a place where we try to give it a nice place and platform – a home for that item.”

In sharing these secrets – these traditions and practices that have captured their hearts – and respectfully ‘interfering’ with them, they are finding them new audiences and admirers. Perhaps most excitingly for Johan and Aamu too, they are winning the hearts of Russians, Koreans, Mexicans and Finnish people who visit their store. These people see traditional crafts from their countries – perhaps once dismissed as old fashioned, primitive or only for tourists – in a whole new light. And they are proud. Johan himself experienced this change of heart.

“For example when we started, we began to look into Finnish traditions,” Johan says. “I was quite bored with them and thought ‘this is not going to be a fun project’ but Aamu had a fresh perspective on it. So it turned out to be very fun.”

One of Salakauppa’s earliest products was part of the Secrets of Finland collection. The Dance Shoes – an adorable set of fire-engine-red adult-sized felt slippers with an identical child-size pair mounted in reverse on top. The sweet idea being to facilitate the act of a child dancing on their parents’ feet. Aamu and Johan designed these beauties in 2006 and they have been manufactured ever since in Jämsä Finland by Lahtiset – a family felt shoe company dating back to 1921.

(Left)
Dance Shoes: designed in 2007 by Aamu Song / COMPANY. Manufactured by Lahtiset in Jämsä, Finland. Image: Paavo Lehtonen.

Aamu recalls a teenager from Denmark visiting their store recently. He bought something but before leaving he told her: “When I was child I was dancing with my mum and dad in your dancing shoes.”

“And it was made in 2007, so yeah, it's possible!” Aamu says. “I think it's nice to see how our product helped to produce such a nice young man.” I myself am struck by the role these shoes played in not only initiating a beautiful bonding ritual between a boy and his parents, but also in helping to preserve the memory of it for this boy, by making it just a little more magical and special. Such is the power of secrets.

• • •

Customer interactions at Salakauppa are almost as important as the products themselves for the shopkeepers. “Many people come to our shop like they might go to the park,” says Aamu, “and they say ‘it’s so nice’ and then they go or they might say ‘oh I don't have money’.”

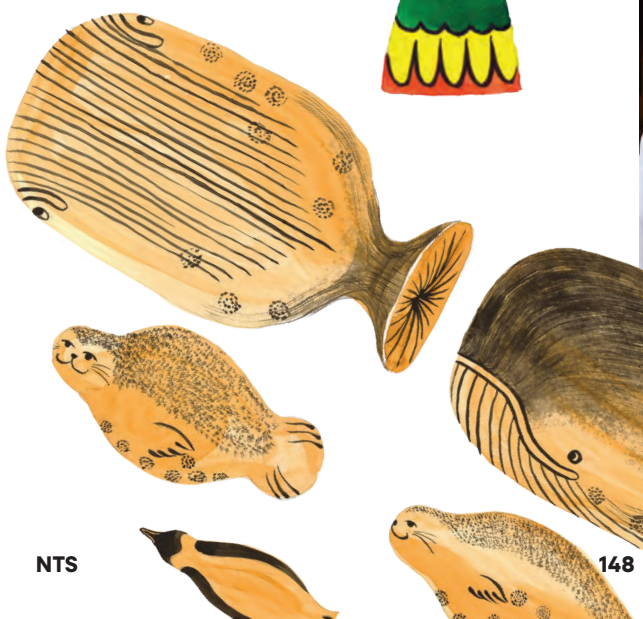
“And so actually I invented this response in the last few days: ‘don't buy it. It’s like your park, so you come and feel and then go.’

“Because we don't have many of each piece. I think our products are not actually made to sell. I like people to get the meaning and to understand what we are doing – or what that different country means and its amazing cultural heritage.”

I remark that it sounds less like a shop and more like a folk art museum. Johan says they have sometimes wondered whether they should call it a museum rather than a shop. And this is when Aamu gets animated: “But if it’s a museum it’s difficult to approach,” she says. A museum or gallery might read as elitist but a shop – a shop is for everyone. Aamu says that as a “museum director” she would never be able to have the same casual and natural interactions with their customers about all the beautiful products. “I mainly say ‘don’t buy it’,” Aamu laughs, “I’m sorry – it’s too funny!” and it is. Despite Aamu’s best efforts to deter customers, they do sell their products though and this is important, as each product sold means Aamu and Johan can make more with the makers.

• • •

More of Aamu's design drawings courtesy of COMPANY.



I wonder if there are any crafts or traditions in other parts of the world that the couple is itching to explore and learn. Aamu’s eyes go wide and she laughs kindly at the absurdity of my question. “Yes!” she says. “We have a long wish list.” Johan adds.

“When we were recently in Milano, we found an amazing basket, which I thought was a very Italian thing and I asked the shop owner where it's made and he said Indonesia,” Aamu says. “And then the day before yesterday a guy came into the shop with his Finnish wife and he said he's from Nepal but they met in Indonesia and he said there's a basket fair where every tribe brings a basket and it happens in Jakarta.” It sounds like Secrets of Indonesia will not be far away.

“All the customers share ideas of where to go too,” Aamu says. And I’m not surprised. I find myself doing the same – the thought of a handcrafted object, a familiar object of nostalgia, reimagined by their care and whimsy is so alluring. “But we are running out of time, so we have to hurry up!” says Johan. “But we are getting old and it's so slow!” Aamu exclaims.

“I mean, this whole process is very slow and there's really no way to speed it up and we don't want to,” Johan adds. And this is not just the painstaking process of tracking, tracing and learning towards a new secret – nurturing the existing secrets also takes a great deal of time and energy. Aamu and Johan have been working with some of their masters for 25 years now. “We don't cut any connection,” Aamu says.

• • •

(Above)
Animals of the World (2025) designed by Johan Olin / COMPANY. Handmade by Haapareppu (Sirkka and Eija) in Joutsa, Finland.

For this year’s Milan Design Week Aamu and Johan were invited by Small Small Space gallery in Milan to take over a very small space indeed. What was particularly serendipitous and irresistible for them was that this space was once a toy shop. They went, not in search of commercial partnerships or to sell lots of products (though they did sell out). “I mean, it's like if you’re a fan of rock music you go to a rock festival and Milan is like that – if you like design you gather and share your love,” says Aamu. “So by keeping a small shop in a small small space and sharing our way of working, we did that.”

salakauppa.fi
@salakauppa

(Right)
Salakauppa's takeover of Small Small Space for Milan Design Week 2005. Images: Michelle Foti.

A Case Study in Conservation: The Ancient City of Nantou

WORDS NICKY LOBO

Placing social relationships at the heart of the architectural process, Urbanus has embarked on a remarkable journey of listening, experimentation, synthesis and co-creation in Shenzhen to regenerate a city that encircles and holds its multiple histories.

(Top right)

The complex context of Nantou: a city within a city. Image: 2017©UABB. Photographer: Zhang Chao.

(Right)

Looking down on Nantou Old Town during the 2017 Shenzhen-Hong Kong Urbanism\Architecture Bi-City Biennale. Image: 2017©UABB. Photographer: Zhang Chao.

One of the tragedies of rapid urbanisation and gentrification is the irretrievable loss of character and diversity, resulting in homogenous architectural landscapes and experiences. This side effect of globalisation – in some ways inevitable – also entails what is considered in peace and conflict studies as a violent silencing of certain histories and peoples. Those considered unimportant, unworthy or undesirable can literally be erased – demolished in the name of 'renewal'. But Nantou Village, in the historic centre of Shenzhen (in China's Guangdong province), has been guided through an architectural intervention as a truth-telling process that welcomes and honours all it has been, and can be.

Even amongst the wide and diverse multitudes of China's cities, Nantou holds a unique position. Founded during the Eastern Jin Dynasty (331 CE), it played an important administrative and commercial role for centuries, before its decline in the mid-20th Century, in what is now the Shenzhen-Hong Kong region. Over time, elements of the historic ancient town have vanished, whilst an informal village grew around it; then in 2004 a mode of '100 per cent urbanisation' was instigated when the city became China's first to be officially free of rural administrative divisions and social systems.

Government, state-owned enterprises and real estate developers led a 'top down' urbanisation process; whilst at the same time, unofficial construction (with over 1000 illegal 'handshake' buildings[1]) also contributed to Nantou's rapid development. Needless to say, the result was messy, unplanned and complex: a historical town within an urban village, encircled by a modern city.

Initially, the urban villages that had haphazardly appeared across wider Shenzhen were considered flaws against an ideal of 'perfect urbanisation'. To create a mirage of uniform success, many of these authentic villages in other areas were completely demolished and rebuilt. High-rise office buildings, shopping malls and high-density residential buildings appeared, delivering great profits to developers and short-lived satisfaction amongst villagers, who received compensation packages to sweeten the transition.

1 These are buildings that have been built so close together that residents could literally shake hands through their windows.

(Below)

The south gate, built more than 600 years ago, is one of the architectural relics of the ancient city of Nantou that was once a walled city. Image: 2017©URBANUS.

As a practice focused on architectural design and urban research in the context of contemporary Chinese cities, URBANUS noted, however, the long-term, irretrievable losses of this process. "The original lifestyle disappeared instantly and thoroughly, as if they never existed…", laments Luo Yiqian, researcher at URBANUS, in a piece titled 'Towards Cities Grow in Difference', which continues:

"Losing their affordable living space, millions of tenants had to move to other surviving urban villages or leave the city for good. As these communities move away, the city's operational cost rises, its memory fades, and the urban identity becomes hard to accumulate. This regeneration model comes at the cost of the distinctive feature, history and one of multiple future possibilities of Shenzhen".

As the perception of urban villages gradually shifted from one of deficiency ('urban disease') to something vital ('urban organ'), URBANUS recognised that tensions between village and city in fact represented Shenzhen's unique history, character and value. "Both [are inseparable] narratives… Shenzhen cannot move toward a future discarding its own history," argues the author. Taking cues from an updated urban regeneration policy that instructed integrated renovation (rather than demolition and uniform replication of selected buildings), URBANUS saw an opportunity for a community-based curatorial approach.

(Above)

A view into Baode Square from one of its new public buildings. Image: 2017©URBANUS. Photographer: Zhang Chao.

(Below)

The mix of architecture in Nantou includes historic buildings and cultural relics, buildings from the 1950s, 1980s and 21st century architecture. Image: 2017©URBANUS photographer: Zhang Chao.

(Above)

Baode Square – a basketball court and plaza – with the subsequent addition of the Nantou Hybrid Building that was completed in 2023. Image: 2023©Zhang Chao.

(Below)

The stepped roof tops of the public buildings in Baode Square double as public seating, both when events take place in the square and during daily life. They are also a fun place to play. Image: 2017©UABB photographer: Zhang Chao.

In early 2016, URBANUS, who operate less as traditional architecture practice and more as a think tank, was invited to conduct a comprehensive spatial study of Nantou Old Town. There, they've conducted rigorous research and elastic experimentation through an innovative city-as-exhibition model to reconcile the city's multiple histories, through a process that's deep on engagement and light on intervention – and community-led rather than imposed. Through historical documents and field research URBANUS developed a regeneration strategy focused on rejuvenating Nantou through incremental revitalisation that impacts larger clusters with micro-scale interventions, as well as organising cultural events.

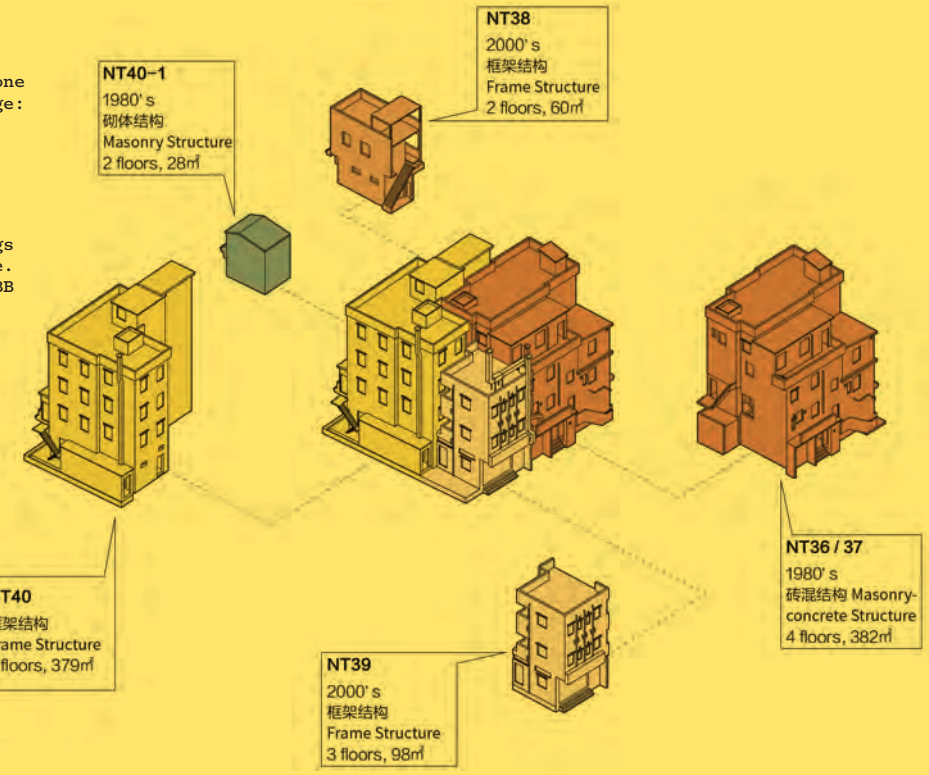
In 2017, URBANUS served as the curatorial team and brought the "Shenzhen-Hong Kong Bi-City Biennale of Urbanism \ Architecture" to Nantou Old Town. It marked the commencement of preserving and revitalising Nantou Old Town through integrating spatial renovation with exhibition. As the main venue, Nantou city would become a living exhibition site, which would reveal its plural identities, functions and potential, via a deep process of co-design with citizens. An Urban Village Laboratory paired

(Left)

An axonometric drawing of the Cross Street Zone in Nantou. Image: 2017©URBANUS.

(Left below)

Once of the public buildings in Baode Square. Image: 2017©UABB photographer: Zhang Chao.



(Above)

An axonometric drawing of Nantou Hybrid Building before its renovation that reflects the disparate eras and styles of architecture that it brought together into one united building. Image: 2023©URBANUS.

Nantou Hybrid Building nestled in against Baode Square. 2023©Zhang Chao.

designers and residents who intended to have their houses renovated, with several cooperative projects enabled. More community consultation was invited through forums that explored wider social, cultural and spatial issues through a series of resident and local business storytelling, studies and research by urban planners and architects – and even art performances enacting daily life in urban villages. To ensure the longevity of visions, an additional forum brought together residents, government representatives and directors, social organisations and industry professionals to explore pathways for Nantou beyond the biennale.

Then, in 2019, URBANUS extended its work in Nantou Old Town, applying the concept of "Urban Coexistence" to the transformation of the Nantou Hybrid Building. This project demonstrates a progressive regeneration approach, focusing on preserving historical layers through collaging and juxtaposition, rather than replacement.

Through the project, several exhibition venues were identified for renewal to act as nodes in the public space journey and provide the structural framework for future city development. 'Baode Square', the old threshing venue at the centre of the old town, became a terrazzo basketball court and plaza. Temporary sheds became permanent public buildings with shared rooftop 'viewing steps' providing access, welcome public space

(Below)

Pingheng, Understanding Chinese Reality by Boa Mistura was painted on the facade of the former factory hosting the 2017 Bi-City Biennale. Image: 2017©UABB photographer: Zhang Chao.

(Right)

More artwork as part of the 2017 Bi-City Biennale of Urbanism\ Architecture. Image: 2017©UABB photographer: Zhang Chao.

(Below right)

The Fire Foodies Club, an installation for the 2017 Bi-City Biennale of Urbanism\ Architecture by Atelier Bow Wow. Image: 2017©UABB photographer: Zhang Chao.

(Below)

WEGO: an installation by The Why Factory and architecture studio MVRDV that showcases design for high density development and reflects resident fantasies and desires as part of the 2017 Bi-City Biennale. Image: 2017©Wu Qingshan.

and integration with surroundings. The existing Public Stage was renovated with new sloped seating areas and a fabric curtain inserted under the existing steel roof truss. The jewel-like symbol of plurality is the Nantou Hybrid Building: a cluster of five individual buildings from different periods of history. An elegant adaptive reuse design showcases their diverse materials, structures and styles; a celebration of "complexity, contradiction and conflicts".

Eschewing the top-down, unilateral decision-making approach characteristic of many urban renewals and 'starchitect' practices, URBANUS' consultative intervention in Nantou "emphasised the engagement of various parties, [striving to] respect residents' daily life and stimulate cultural awareness and confidence of the community," as the authors of 'Towards Cities Grow in Difference' explain. The result of this – arguably longer, slower, quieter – process is a greater sense of agency, ownership and collaboration amongst the community. It is a process that respects multiple stakeholders, perspectives and rights, with URBANUS acknowledging that "the production of space in urban villages is not only a process of creating spatial products, but also a process of recreating social relations". This social intention seems obvious for public spaces, but can be subsumed when physical outcomes become the 'hero' of the architectural process, or when warring egos and power dynamics divest projects of their creative, social and economic potential.

Processes like these also embed social sustainability, in the sense that shared ownership is the foundation for ongoing care and custodianship. People, businesses and organisations are likely to stay and support a project, idea or place they've emotionally invested in through co-creation. In Nantou the city can continue to authentically 'become' as a reflection of its participants when not forced to adhere to an imposed, sanitised, singular architectural narrative. And this is why — whilst the architectural interventions of Nantou are beautifully conceived and executed — the deeper value of this project is its cultivation of dynamic, healing and transformative relationships: between people, between places, and between Nantou's past, present and future.

WORDS KIRSTEN DRYSDALE

Good cult bad cult?

Just be chill.

Seven years ago, I bought a Thermomix TM5.

If you know anything about Thermomixes, you'll know that the TM5 model came *after* the TM31 model, which had an unfortunate tendency to explode while mixing hot liquids. You'd be standing there waiting for your semi-automated mushroom risotto to finish cooking, and end up in a burns unit, scalded so badly it took weeks to recover.

Hot wet rice sending people to hospital was not a good brand story, but ThermomixTM survived that PR disaster, thanks in large part to its extraordinarily loyal customer base: as anyone who owns a Thermomix will tell you, a Thermomix is not *just* a kitchen appliance. It's not even *just* a German-engineered, ergonomically designed, multi-purpose blender with a 500W motor and top-quality stainless steel blades that spin at 10,000 RPM (the same speed as turbines in a jet engine, if you're wondering).

Guys. Please. It's so much more than that! A Thermomix is a way of life. It's an online recipe subscription service, a passionate homemaker community, and a comprehensive cooking *philosophy* with a small but highly-dedicated following of people who will evangelise about the life-changing impact of their premium pulveriser to anyone who will listen.

Wait. Is it... am I in... is this a *cult*? What makes a cult a "cult" anyway? A community of people getting a bit intense about something? That seems unfair. Or it is only when that passion turns toxic that the 'c'-word ought apply? This is an inherently tricky area, the proximity to organised religion and political movements make it hard to pin something down as a cult. There's not even an agreed-upon legal definition for the word 'cult' – we identify them through vibes, basically. There are a few common characteristics – a charismatic leader, emotional and psychological manipulation of members, excessive and irrational devotion to the group's teachings, and isolation from mainstream society. (But here's the issue: using that logic, we could also be describing a spin class!)

Look, the Thermomix world is certainly cult-like, there's no denying it. But you know going in that this is no ordinary retail experience. To buy a Thermomix, you have to attend a Thermomix "demonstration party", hosted by an official Thermomix consultant (charismatic leader?) who wears an apron in Thermomix green with the Thermomix logo embroidered on it. This isn't a "party" in the traditional sense. It's a mid-morning gathering of 4-5 women (it's almost always all women) at your cousin's wife's house, Prosecco in hand (psychological manipulation?), glossy Thermomix brochures on the table, enthusiastic *ooohs-and-aaahs* as the consultant casually shows how her shiny, terrifying machine effortlessly – and in mere seconds! – turns regular almonds into almond flour, regular sugar into icing powder, regular ice into sorbet. (Can't turn regular water into wine, though. One trick short of true religion.)

"IT'S WHISPER QUIET!" you shout over the roar of jet engine food prep (excessive and irrational devotion to the group's teachings?). Your cousin's wife gets a small discount on her Thermomix and a free insulated bowl if any of the attendees also buy one. There's no pressure (really, there's no pressure), which paradoxically makes you even more into the idea. The soft serve raspberry "ice cream" (a blitzed bag of frozen berries) the host serves for dessert is *really* good. And the built-in scale? Genius.

I spent $2200 on my Thermomix TM5 (guaranteed not to explode). I justified it thusly: I owned virtually no kitchen appliances at the time, so this would be doing the job of several. Plus, I was pregnant with my first child and thought it would be extremely useful for preparing purees. And you know what – it did, and it was! I used my Thermomix a *lot* for a few years, and I probably annoyed a lot of people talking about it. But the infatuation passed. Now, the most powerful machine in our house sits on the bottom shelf at the back of the impossible-to-get-to corner cupboard. We have the odd fling, for old times' sake. A craving for homemade hollandaise sauce or a demand for meringue will see it briefly return to the kitchen bench. Then it's banished again.

So I guess I've left the cult, but truth be told, my heart wasn't ever fully in it. Despite the gentle pressure to do so at the demonstration party/initiation ceremony, I didn't sign up for the online recipe club, or buy any of the add-ons and accessories. The official Thermomix consultant called a few times over the following months, politely enquiring about how I was finding my new kitchen friend, and asking whether maybe *I* would like to host my own demonstration party? (No thanks.) She eventually left me alone. My cousin's wife is still a Full On Thermomix Convert, and uses hers multiple times a day. Some aspect of virtually every meal she makes is prepared in the Silver Chamber of Complete Family Nutrition. And that's fine! I'm happy for her. I haven't been ostracised for tapping out, she hasn't cut herself off from mainstream society, everyone is still being normal.

This is, I feel, how all cults should operate. By offering something genuinely good and useful, and providing a supportive community to those who fully embrace it, but accepting that not everyone is going to be wholly, or forever, on board.

Now: let us contrast my harmless Thermomix journey with a bizarre experience I had while share-housing in my 20s. My (newish) flatmate asked me to be home by a certain hour one Tuesday evening so that I could participate in what I *thought* was a community environmental meeting, but turned out to be a recruitment drive for a personal development program.

There was a lectern set up in our living room. A whiteboard. A circle of chairs, with a bunch of people I'd never seen before sitting on them, all looking profoundly uncomfortable. Josh* adopted a Tom-Cruise-in-*Magnolia* persona[1], gave us a scripted spiel about ambition and potential and fulfilment and achieving goals. He drew triangles and squares and circles on the whiteboard to help emphasise the key points. I was confused. This all seemed a bit over the top, just to organise a crew of neighbours to help clear the plastic rubbish out of the mangroves down the road.

Then, he gave us each a pen and paper, and told us to write down something we felt we were failing at. It could be our love life, our jobs, our health – whatever. I wrote down budgeting. I'd been wasting a lot of money on kebabs, menthol cigarettes, and elaborate costumes for dress-up parties. (I was in my 20s. No regrets.)

Then – I should have seen this coming – we had to go around the circle and tell everyone what we had written down. Now, I don't know whether the others were there on the same misunderstanding I was (I'd mixed up the name of the program with a well-known conservation group), but I am absolutely certain that no one felt comfortable about this sudden, forced baring of fragile souls with complete strangers. Some people cried, one guy just walked out. (I would have, but where could *I* go – it was my house!) This demonstration party really needed more Prosecco, and less psychological torture.

It turned out all we needed to do, to turn our failures into successes, was sign up to attend a three-days-and-one-night seminar which offered "breakthroughs" through "transformative learning" that would "dramatically elevate your effectiveness in those areas of life that are most important to you" and would cost $900. No one in that room had $900 to spend, but Josh had the form for our credit card details at the ready, and was really rather insistent that we fill it out. No soft serve – just a hard sell. I was steadfast in my refusal as he hovered over me with his clipboard. It had changed *his* life – he was positive it would change ours too. I moved out two weeks later.

Still, I think it's natural for people to want to share things they've found that work for them. It's cool you're into CrossFit / sunrise breathwork sessions / naked yoga (do not Google) / the Landmark Forum (do not confuse with Landcare) / pub choir / a high-protein diet. And sure, I'll try it out (please make sure we're on the same page about what I'm trying, though!).

Just please – if it's not for me, let me back out. The secret to being "culty" in the good way, but never crossing over into actual cult territory, is keeping it chill.

**not his real name*

1 *Magnolia*: the 1999 Paul Thomas Anderson film – nay, *masterpiece* – in which Tom Cruise plays a ponytailed, leather-vested, stage-strutting, borderline-demented dating guru. Cruise gives a truly celestial performance of a person bursting at the seams with self-belief, evangelising spirit and a deeply disturbed psyche – his character is essentially an Andrew Tate-style manosphere influencer, before we called them 'manosphere influencers'. The movie has a stellar ensemble cast and an unforgettable scene where it rains frogs from the sky.

New York's Tenements

The foundations of a city

WORDS KIRSTEN DRYSDALE

What is New York City made of? If it were a cake, what would the key ingredient be? What would be the essence that set it apart from every other baked treat on the shelf? Even a person who has never been to New York can almost certainly attempt to answer these questions. You can't help but feel you know the place, at least a little – it's where your favourite sitcom is set, it's the city that never sleeps, the city where dreams are made, the Big Apple. It's where people hail a yellow cab with a bold whistle or shout, ride the subway, sit on the stoop, grab a slice of pizza or a pretzel or a bagel. Have a hotdog, get a coffee,[1] take a stroll through Central Park, navigate numbered streets and the glare of Times Square, yell "Hey – I'm walkin' here!" on your way to a rooftop bar, check out Broadway and Brooklyn, check out Chinatown and then Little Italy right beside it, hear half a dozen different languages pass you by as you jostle for space on the sidewalk. New York is not just *a* cosmopolitan city, it's *the* cosmopolitan city. People of the world come here, and make it theirs – and that's how it's always been.

Like all concrete jungles, New York City is a human construction. And so, its buildings are a reflection of its human character. The Manhattan skyline is recognisable even in silhouette, the towering assertion of an economic marvel and the mark of busy business people and financiers, striding around in their suits, shouting into their phones on the floor of the Wall Street stock exchange. But those modern-day moneymen and their shiny skyscrapers aren't the heart of the city. The architectural fabric at ground level in the city's residential districts is far more foundational; you need to go *there* to get a real sense of New York's roots. Explore these parts of the city on foot and you'll encounter brownstones, row houses, bodegas and diners. And, where they are still standing, you'll find New York's iconic tenements: the apartment buildings which the city (in)famously grew from, and are key to the story of the United States as a nation. Millions of Americans can trace their history back to these buildings, to a room where a newly arrived immigrant made their start a century or more ago.

A story told in zeroes

What you really have to understand about what makes New York *New York*, is that it's a city that virtually exploded into being. It is what it is today thanks to the turbocharged growth it experienced in the 19th and 20th centuries, when an immigration population boom hit the place like a tsunami of humanity. The 1800s had brought tough conditions to many parts of the world: the Irish faced starvation; the Germans were enduring crippling economic conditions and political unrest; all across Europe, people could choose to put up with religious persecution and a crushing lack of opportunity – or to throw it all in, board a ship for 'the land of the free' and chase the promise of economic liberation. New York went from being a trading post and administrative centre to a metropolis like no other, the biggest in the world for a time.

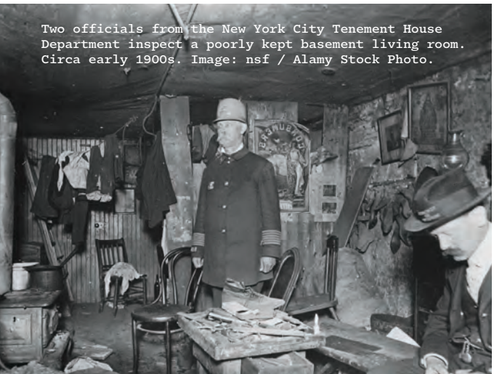
1 Sorry, a caw-uhfee. The city's voice is more than just an accent. The hustle-bustle mix of humanity has somehow produced a dialect of New York's own. No short 'o's for these guys. Native New Yorkers simply ignore r's if they appear at the end of a word, and speak through the front of their mouth, down through their bottom lip.

1.

2.

ildren playing with spinning tops. Image: Arthur
eipzig. Tops, 1949. Toned gelatin silver print.
rooklyn Museum, Gift of the artist, 86.152.2

3.



Two officials from the New York City Tenement House Department inspect a poorly kept basement living room. Circa early 1900s. Image: nsf / Alamy Stock Photo.

The cramped nature of the tenements forced life (and baths) outside.

1. A Jewish woman teaching young girls a folk dance in a Lower East Side playground. Photograph by Arnold Eagle, Courtesy of the Tenement Museum.

2. A bathtub stored in a New York tenement air shaft. Photograph by Jacob A. Riis, c1890. Image: GRANGER - Historical Picture Archive / Alamy Stock Photo.

3. *Heat Spell, Children Sleeping on the Fire Escape, the Lower East Side*. May 23, 1941. Image: Weegee (Arthur Fellig) courtesy of the Getty Museum.

(Above)

The original main staircase in the front hall of the historic 97 Orchard Street tenement. Image: Ryan Lahiff courtesy of the Tenement Museum.

(Right)

The kitchen of Apartment 3 which has been preserved as a 'ruin' space in the 97 Orchard Street tenement. Image: Ryan Lahiff courtesy of the Tenement Museum.

(Page 160-161)

Image: Alain Le Garsmeur Harlem / Alamy Stock Photo.

(Above)

A photograph taken in 1912 shows life spilling out of a tightly packed row of tenements on Elizabeth St in what is now known as Nolita in Manhattan. Image: Lewis Wickes Hine, courtesy of the Library of Congress.

(Right)

Summer, The Lower East Side, New York City taken by Weegee (Arthur Fellig) in 1937. Image: courtesy of the Getty Museum.

Numbers tell the story better than words can: the city's residents numbered around 125,000 in 1820. Fifty years later, there were almost 1.5 million of them. Millions of people came from all over the world to the promise of America, a huge proportion of them entering through 'The Golden Gate' of the immigration station on Ellis Island. A full 70 per cent of those new Americans went no further than the closest city to that gate: New York. At several intense points between the mid 1800s and early 1900s, New York city's population doubled in size over the period of a mere decade.

> By some measures, there was a new New Yorker arriving *every 15 seconds* between 1900 and 1910 – the geographical spread of the city doubled in that same period. Even still, at the turn of the 20th century, the Lower East Side had the highest population density in the world.

It is hard to grasp the sheer scale and speed of this growth a hundred and some years on but try, if you can, to imagine it happening in your own city today: a human being shows up on the street carrying all their worldly possessions in a tattered suitcase and ready to make a fist of life in this fabled place.

Now another arrives.

Now another.

In one hour, there are 240 new people needing lodging. In one day, there are more than 5000. There'll be more people arriving tomorrow, and more people the day after that. It's basic maths, endless addition, numbers with more and more zeroes on the end of them. Anyone witnessing a phenomenon like this is compelled to wonder: where will they eat and sleep?

More rooms, more floors, more buildings

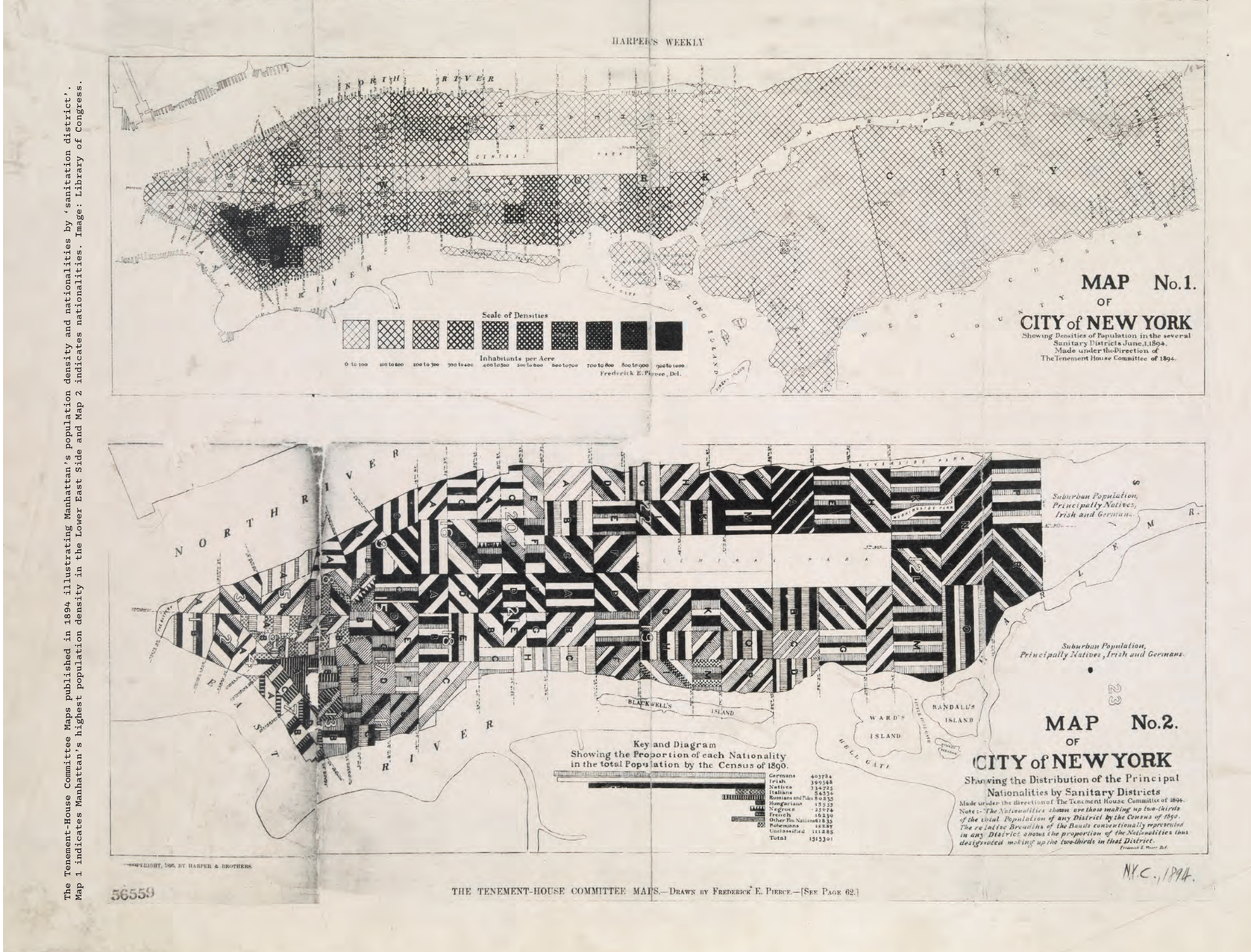
The answer was – at first – a necessarily pragmatic one: 'anywhere they can'. New York's modest supply of single family homes were divided into multi-family dwellings. Then, within those, individual rooms were divided into ever smaller spaces, and then additional stories were built on top of existing walls, and then extensions were attached to the rear of a block. As a key report[2] written at the time put it, "Where two families had lived 10 moved in." It goes without saying that none of these early tenements (and all their makeshift extensions) were particularly sound structures. When the city ran out of existing structures to convert, savvy developers jumped in, offering purpose-built tenement buildings with shared stairwells and common access areas, and a few small rooms to each flat. Consider a few more numbers: more than half the city – 500,000 out of 800,000 people – were living in some iteration of a tenement building by 1864.

It was chaos, hastily organised on a grid[3]. The tenement buildings were concentrated on the Lower East Side, but clustered elsewhere across the spreading city too. They tended to organise themselves along ethnic lines – a set of maps drawn up by the city's Tenement-House Committee in the late 1800s recorded the population density and national background of residents in different areas. The maps' labels included "Germans, Irish, Natives, Italians, Russians and Poles, Hungarians, Negroes, French, Other Foreign Nations and Bohemians".

> Forgiving the somewhat archaic descriptions the document used, it remains one of the best illustrations of just how these apartment buildings – perhaps more than any other structure in New York – are the city's DNA.

2 "How The Other Half Lives" (1890), by Jacob Riis, a Danish-American photojournalist, was the first publication to document the terrible living conditions in the tenements. It shocked the middle- and upper-classes, but led to important reforms and regulations to improve the design and safety profile of buildings for communal living.

3 The Manhattan Grid is a very important part of this story. It dates back to an 1807 plan for the city, considered by many to be "the single most important document in New York City's development". The plan was a map of the island, overlaid with a proposed grid, allowing for lots of about 25 feet by 100 feet to scaffold its development. The size, layout and density of the tenements were determined by these constraints.



The Tenement-House Committee Maps published in 1894 illustrating Manhattan's population density and nationalities by 'sanitation district'. Map 1 indicates Manhattan's highest population density in the Lower East Side and Map 2 indicates nationalities. Image: Library of Congress.

Discovering a time capsule

You can see this for yourself by entering the tenement building at 97 Orchard Street and travelling through time. This building is now part of the extraordinary Tenement Museum (which also includes a newer tenement at 103 Orchard Street).

> Originally constructed as a row of three 'Old-Law4 tenements' in 1863, it was home to 7000 people from 20 different countries between 1865 and 1935.

But in 1939, the number of people living in the building dropped dramatically. The landlord at that time grew tired of trying to upgrade the building to meet new regulations. It seemed a much easier route to simply close off the upper levels and keep only the first floor in use.

By the time the Tenement Museum's founders, Ruth Abram and Anita Jacobson, stumbled across the building in 1988, those upper floors had been sealed shut for almost 50 years. Inside were apartments that gave a three-dimensional snapshot of what life had been like for those living within the walls – beneath decades of dust and debris were dolls, playing cards, business cards and library notices, cooking utensils, hairpins and newspapers. The women recognised this would be an extraordinary way to tell the story of New York's immigrant history, and quickly set about establishing it as an immersive, real-world historical experience that challenged the conventional approach to museum design. They meticulously researched the stories of the original inhabitants, set up different apartments to reflect different eras, and recreated, down to the finest detail, the family homes of former residents. Soon, they were running a very popular 'underground' museum that tourists flocked to.

"Being able to stand inside the tenement apartments themselves is integral to being able to 'put yourself in the shoes' of a former resident whose story you are learning about," explains David Favaloro, the museum's current Senior Director of Curatorial Affairs and Hebrew Technical Institute Research Fellow. Part of the museum's unique experience is being guided through the apartments by trained educators, and meeting some of the building's 'residents', played by actors in period costumes.

"Former residents and their descendants are key to the work we do and are an essential part of our process of exhibit development and storytelling," says Favaloro. "It is from [them] that we obtain the photographs of each family you see on tours ... they often are able to share stories and memories that could never been found in the public record of documents, and have been instrumental in the physical recreation of their family's homes – from helping the museum team ensure that the correct furnishings were installed to providing feedback that allowed the museum team to fine tune the 'tone' of the apartment's presentation."

In 2006, in order to better respond to its growing popularity, the museum underwent a major expansion and renovation project. Nick Leahy, co-CEO of global design firm Perkins Eastman, was brought on as the lead designer for the 'unique assignment', and saw it as an exercise in narrative as much as a physical conservation effort. "It's an interesting sociological project in the sense that they were interested in using the building fabric to tell the stories of the people who lived in the apartments as social history, so architecture becomes a prop – the background – to the actual stories," he says. "Normally, when you participate in a restoration project, you're bringing it back to a period, like 1880 or whenever, and you're trying to recreate what was there. But this was unique in the sense of what they were doing was stabilising the building as a record of transformation over time."

Favaloro singles out one particular unrestored "ruin" apartment that was left in its discovered condition as an example of how powerful this authenticity can be. "Here the layers of paint, wallpaper, etc. are left visible – and help provide a sense of the layers of human experience lived within its walls. To me, these might be the most emotionally striking spaces in the museum."

4 New York's tenement buildings fall into one of a few categories, depending on their date of construction: there are the 'pre-law' tenements, established before any regulations were in place. Then there are the 'Old Law' tenements, bound only by 1860s laws requiring fire escapes, and by the Tenement House Act of 1879 which *tried* to improve ventilation by requiring external windows and air shafts – but inadvertently worsened conditions when those shafts ended up being used for garbage disposal. The "New Law" of 1901 (the New York State Tenement House Act) was what really made all the difference: it required all buildings to have outward-facing windows, indoor toilets, and an open-air courtyard – changes that made natural light and proper ventilation a basic standard, and made apartment living a far more palatable option.

Crowded, but with community

Any effort to learn about New York's tenements turns up a mountain of documentation of the horrors of their cramped and unsanitary conditions. Unscrupulous landlords often exploited desperate migrants with nowhere else to go, charging rent to as many people as could be crammed into the flats – some accommodated families as large as 10 or 11 members. The earliest tenements, especially, were not bound by any regulations around the provision of natural light, ventilation or safe egress. Public health concerns around the spread of disease in these communities (waves of respiratory illnesses such as tuberculosis were particularly devastating) drove progress in terms of design requirements, and over time the physical environment was significantly improved.

And yet. There were still positive experiences to be had in the simple fact of *being around other people*, especially people who understood your migrant experience.

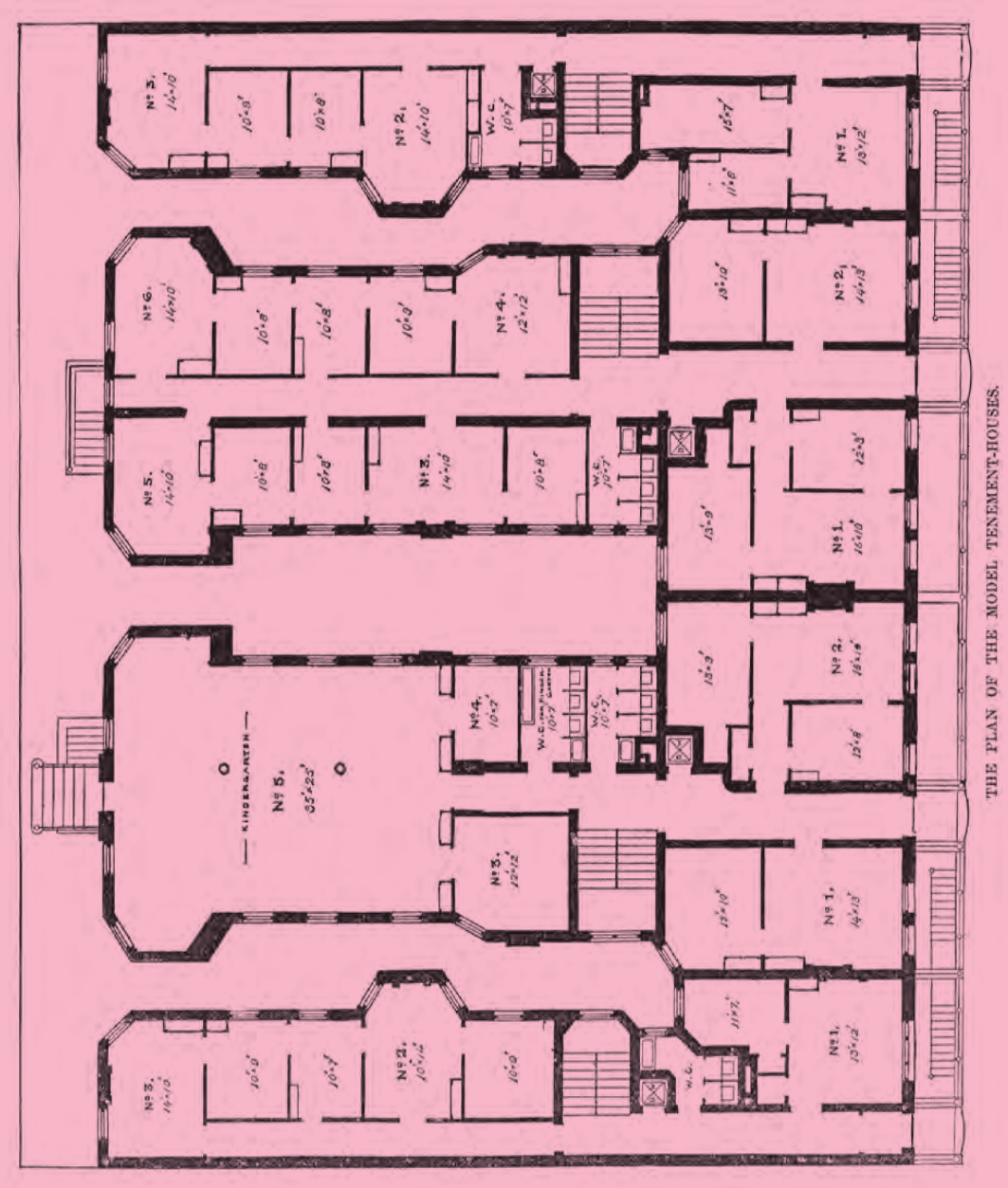
Certainly the response of former tenants who visit the Tenement Museum suggests there are many happy memories of this communal living experience. "For those former residents who had lived in these buildings, having them see their recreated apartments, often from their childhoods, was like welcoming them back home. The emotional connections they made to the spaces were visibly palpable," says Favaloro.

He points out that the singular focus of the negative aspects of tenement living miss the perspective of those who actually experienced it.

"Much of what we know about the tenements in mid/late 19th and early 20th century New York comes to us via the written accounts of reformers, and so these "horrors" come from a particular point of view – typically middle – or upper-class individuals who had ideas about "home" and "family" that were often different from working-class New Yorkers, especially immigrants," Favaloro says. "But some of this residential density enabled the formation of friendships, relationships between families, supportive networks, etc. Some former residents shared stories of inter-ethnic tradition sharing and supporting one another's observance of traditions."

The basement saloon of the Tenement Museum is an example of a space where much of this community building would have taken place. Run by a German couple, John and Caroline Schneider, from 1864 to 1886, the bar offered booze and food and live music – a hub for the homesick. Of course, anxieties around the activities of foreigners were as prevalent then as they can be today. As the Tenement Museum puts it: "Beer gardens and saloons were essential social glue for German immigrants, yet others saw them as sites of drunkenness and lechery, and worried about their impact on 'traditional' American values."

A restored version of Schneider's Lager Bier Saloon at 97 Orchard Street, a place where many German immigrants living in tenement housing would have gathered. Image courtesy of The Tenement Museum.



THE PLAN OF THE MODEL TENEMENT-HOUSES.

(Above)

A floor plan of the model and layout of tenement houses in New York City in 1888. The typical layout of a tenement building consisted of several small, cramped apartments with shared bathrooms in the hallways. Image: GRANGER - Historical Picture Archive / Alamy Stock Photo.

(Page 170-171)

The current facade of the historic 97 Orchard Street tenement, which is one of the current sites belonging to the Tenement Museum. Image courtesy of the Tenement Museum.

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(Above)
This Chinatown loft renovation reworks two neighbouring tenement apartments into a single, spacious 149sqm, L-shaped home. The design retains and elevates original features of the tenement building, including the exposed brick walls and a sequence of 14 windows, filling the space with natural light. Design: Büro Koray Duman. Image: Peter Murdoch.

(Left)
Plywood built-ins for storage and a stainless steel kitchen unit are some of the apartment's features that are both efficient uses of the space with a modern twist on the original tenement building. Image: Peter Murdoch.

"It's a portal into a society, and what is positive is these people were living together who were from different backgrounds, different cultures and different countries, who were put in this place, and they got on. They had to get on," Nick Leahy says. "There's a lot to be learned about living alongside people ... That's why cities work because you bump into other people who aren't like you and have different perspectives and that leads to new ideas, so I think that's the positive."

An enduring legacy

New York's tenements *are* New York, and *made* New York. Without them, New York couldn't have happened (at least, not as we know it). But they've left a mark on more than just New York – the tenements and their design evolution have guided design norms and minimum standards for modern apartment living to this day.

Leahy also points out that while the tenements were often overcrowded, they weren't overbearing in size. In fact, there's an argument they offer a better example of how to calibrate to the human scale than many apartment towers built today.

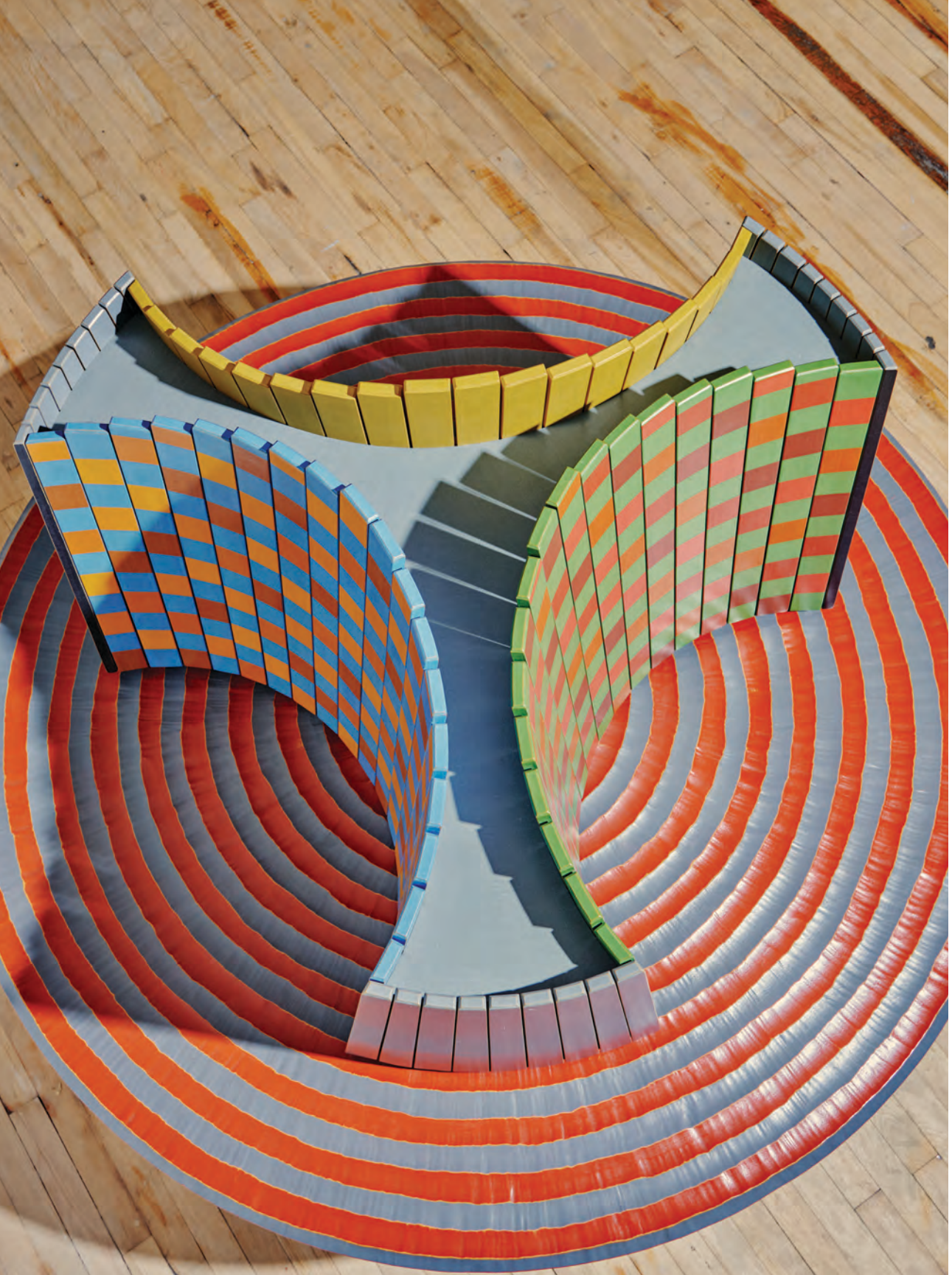
"New York has towers that are as big as some villages or small towns in terms of population and maybe there's a limit to that?" says Leahy. "The more you can instigate a sense of community in your design – that's what you can learn from the five-story Tenement Museum, because the tenants related to the street. The scale of the tenements meant people had to get out."

"I'm not anti-high-rise buildings, but I do think that how a building interacts with the street and activates the street is especially important to the overall feeling of a city, and the tenements did that because of the scale of the blocks and the scale of the streets. And the scale of the buildings has a more humane presence because it's based on a human scale versus some other bigger buildings we build now."

As urban apartment living becomes a more popular (and necessary) form of housing, we can look back to these formative years of one of the world's greatest cities and learn much about how communal living shapes the social and architectural fabric of a place. For every forebear who came through a tenement or its equivalent at the turn of the 20th century, there are many more descendants in the 21st who find themselves living in close quarters with other people. Thoughtful design with the human experience at the centre has made the many benefits of coexistence more obvious, with the most successful projects forming the foundational 'essence' of our cities in the same way the tenements did for New York.

To learn more, visit the Tenement Museum website at tenement.org

A rich tenement neighbourhood street scene characteristic of life and community on the Lower East Side. The image features on the cover of photographers Brian Rose and Edward Fausty's book Time and Space on the Lower East Side. Image courtesy of Brian Rose.



Chairiot (2001-2001).
Image: Matthew Gordon Studio.

A bit off

AN INTERVIEW WITH TOM LOESER

INTERVIEW ELIZABETH PRICE

Tom Loeser has been labeled with a lot of labels over the years: Woodworker. Designer. Fine Art Furniture Maker. Artist. He's hard to pin down and that's just how he likes it. Tom is more than content being elusive and hovering between disciplines, fields and the neat little buckets many of us seem compelled to organise people into. "One visual image that I've used sometimes is a three-circle Venn diagram of design, art and craft. I think that's useful," Tom tells me. "I like to be located in those sections where the Venn diagram overlaps." And this is precisely where Tom has been thriving, happily cogitating in his craft for more than four decades.

Tom's *Folding Chair* created quite the stir with the beautiful young things of Manhattan in the 80s. Colourful and intriguingly complex – in either its chair form or collapsed-and-wall-mounted form – it made for the ideal conversation starter for the cool set. Even at this very early stage of his career, a trio of characteristics that endure as persistent threads in Tom's contemporary body of work are plainly evident: a keen interest in the interplay of colours, a fascination with the objects we sit on, and what friend, curator and writer Glenn Adamson describes as his "elegant twist of perspective" on what we expect a furniture archetype to be or do. At Tom's hands a chair is no more a chair than it is an abstract, wall-hung piece of art. A public bench in a museum is a surprise lazy susan for the unsuspecting tourist seeking to rest their weary legs. And a pair of conjoined rocking chairs are a mischievous instrument of social mediation.

Since the early 1980s, Tom has been "turning furniture upside down and inside out" (to return to his friend Glenn Adamson) to beguiling effect and across a teaching career of almost 30 years, he fostered subsequent generations of furniture-focused artists at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. His one-of-a-kind pieces are held in the public collections of more than 20 museums in the United States and continue to be exhibited regularly all over the world. While we go about our busy daily lives asking a lot of our furniture, I find that Tom Loeser is busy in his Wisconsin workshop, making furniture that has some questions for us instead.

(Left)

Tom in his workshopin Madison, Wisconsin. Image: Jim Escalante.

I understand that, like us (see p180), you have a particular fascination with public seating. Can you share why?

I love this question and I was thinking we could start with *Stoops*. This was actually a collaboration with my wife, Bird Ross. This is just one example of public seating where I was thinking about stoop culture. Do you use the term stoop in Australia?

Not so much but thanks to a healthy diet of American TV and movies, I can easily conjure some images of people perched on the steps of a Brooklyn Brownstone.

I guess I'm interested in seating especially as it relates to situations where people can have social interactions. What I like about stoops is they seem sort of democratic and they seem to be at the intersection between the private and the public. The stoop usually has the house behind it – the private zone – and then the public zone in front. And so stoops make that connection and get people out of the house and onto the sidewalk interacting with people. The other aspect that I like is their flexibility. They're not very prescriptive. They don't even have places that define where your butt should be located. So you can sit flexibly, you can choose different heights, and you can set yourself up in different ways. That's what the appeal was when we made them as public seating for the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art.

The pieces that I'm just working on in my studio now are kind of picking up on *Stoops*. What I'm thinking about is ways that you might be able to bring that kind of open-ended flexible seating to a domestic space. They're supposed to be a little more domestic sized, but I tend to make sort of 'white elephant' objects that are hard to place – that aren't conventional and challenge people to figure out how to fit them into their lives.

(Right)

Stoops (2013) was a public seating project for the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art and a collaboration with Tom's wife, Bird Ross. Tom is pictured second from right and Bird is far right. Image: Jim Escalante.

(Above)

Pieces from Tom's *Double Rocker* series (2005-2007) that prompt varying degrees of social interaction and negotiation from the seated parties (and maybe even a little poking). Images courtesy of Tom Loeser.

Tom produced 35 "sort of limited edition" versions of his "ridiculously popular" *Folding Chair* made of wood and stainless steel. The chairs, that can be folded and hung on a wall, were much coveted by young and stylish apartment dwellers in Manhattan in the 1980s. This version was one of his later pieces, produced in 1989.
Image: Bill Fritsch.

When children see your furniture – with all that colour and invitation for interaction – they must want to climb all over it, no?

I do like that kids like the furniture and that they like interacting with it. I should expect that will happen because of the way I'm setting up the situations but I'm not making the furniture for kids. One word that gets applied to my work sometimes that I'm not so crazy about is *whimsical*. I don't necessarily dislike the word whimsical but I feel like once it gets described as 'whimsical' people don't deal with the underlying concept or ideas.

If it's not for children, is there a desire on your part to connect grown ups to a sense of play?

No, not so much. I think for me it's more that I want the objects to be a little bit unpredictable. Sometimes I think you might not necessarily understand what they do at first. You have to explore them or they take a very expected furniture form and complicate it somehow so that you have to think about it. So, I guess I'm trying to make it so furniture doesn't disappear. It confronts you and you have to think through what it's asking you to do.

Your *Chairiot* and *Panoramic Viewmaster* pieces spring to mind with their elements of surprise in this context.

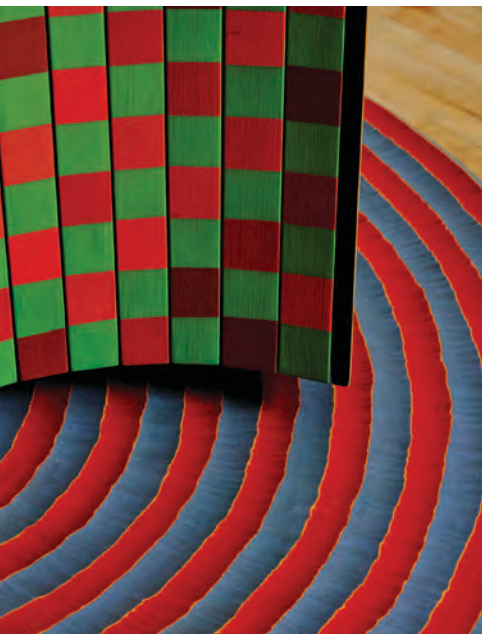
Yes. The *Panoramic Viewmaster* has a seat that is sort of like a lazy Susan that your butt sits on and you can spin the whole horizontal surface, whereas the *Chairiot* has a triple backrest, so three people can sit into those backrests and it's the backrest that spins. These were also made for an exhibition at the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art and they were intended as public seating too. When I go through museums I look at the seating that they're using and it's mostly pretty boring, so I was thinking about how nice it is when there's a bench in the middle of a room and you can sit on that bench and move around and look at everything that's in the room. But what this is making happen is people might sit down separately on this piece and then have a sort of a forced social interaction where if one person wants to move, they're causing this other person to also move. Obviously it's fun. It's done because I want it to be fun, but it's also about the social interaction.

How do your pieces evolve? Do you start with the desire to mess with a chest of drawers or do you just start making? I'm interested to know about your process.

Yeah, it's a bit of a mystery. My gestation period is really long. I can carry ideas around for a really long time.

How long are we talking?

I don't know. This is hard because I'm not a person that keeps a lot of sketchbooks and I look at tonnes of stuff all day, all the time. So, I think I'm just sort of packing stuff in and then an idea will start to percolate and then I will do some sort of model-making and as much sketching as I need to. And then a thing that I find I've been doing more lately is making full-size mockups with basic materials. That's been really helpful. Eventually some pieces require detailed technical drawings to resolve angles and joinery and proportions.



(Right)

Switchback (2024) was inspired by the seating in old commuter trains in Philadelphia that would be flipped when the train changed directions. Image: Jim Escalante.

(Bottom left)

Chairiot (2001-2004) features a triple backrest that spins to allow users to rotate their view of the room (that is unless their neighbour has different ideas). Image: Matthew Gordon Studio.

So taking *Switchback* as an example: I went to college a million years ago in Philadelphia and the college I went to was on a commuter rail line with these really nice old trains and when the train got to the end of the line the conductor walked to the other end and the train drove straight out the other way, but before that, the conductor would come through and flip all the seats. They had this really solid mechanical sound that I really loved and so that's an image I carried and had wanted to do something with for ages. So, it took that long for that piece to come together.

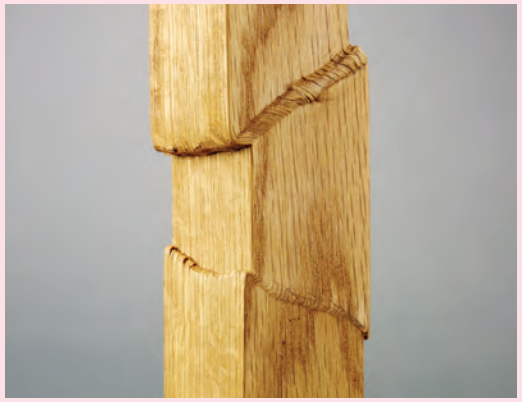
I've also been doing this long enough now that I can look back through my body of work and I can see how pieces I'm working on now are pulling out ideas from earlier work and taking previous ideas and developing them further.

When you're model-making with basic materials, what materials are you working with?

Most often I would make the models out of wood of some sort. And then when I'm building, because I'm so interested in colour and paint, I feel like my process is a bit of a two-part process: part of it is structure and part of it is surface and thinking about the relationship between those two and how I can use the two to support each other. And how I can use the surface to have people do a visual read of the piece that makes them see the piece the way I want them to see it.

(Above)

The human-sized lazy Susan that is *The Panoramic Viewmaster* (2000) that comes with a surprise swivel for the unsuspecting sitter. Image courtesy of Tom Loeser.



(Above)

When I moved to Madison and came to the University of Wisconsin-Madison (this giant research university) to teach, there was this US government forest products laboratory on the campus, which was not really part of the university. When you buy a piece of lumber and it has a stamp on it that gives the standards for that piece of wood in construction, those numbers were all calculated at the forest products lab . It's government sponsored and they do all this crazy stuff there.

I really wanted to have a connection to what they were doing there. It was very hard and took a long time. Then finally they approached us - me and my students - and said would you like to do this exhibition where you respond to some of the processes and techniques and things that we do in the lab? And that's when I took over these pieces of wood and they broke them in their giant hydraulic presses. In a way, this piece tells you a lot about the material and how insanely strong it is. I like the way the legs show this. When it fails you can actually see the structure of the wood and how it let go.

Glenn Adamson, notes the echoes of Gerrit Rietveld's *Red-Blue Chair* in your *Folding Chair* and others note the influences of the Memphis Group. Are there genuine connections there?

When I was in my undergraduate school from about 1979-1982, Memphis was just happening and we would go to the fancy news stand in Harvard Square in Cambridge that had international publications and buy *Domus*[1] and *Arbitare*[2] and that's sort of how we learned about what was going on with Memphis. It was *hugely* influential. It was essentially liberating because Memphis just blew everything out of the water and made it okay to do *everything*. And made it okay, in a funny sort of way, to make things that are ugly.

It wasn't really until Droog[3] showed up in the design scene that I felt that another movement or idea sort of caught up with Memphis, but then actually moved beyond it. I got a lot more out of what I saw in their design. Droog seemed to engage with a much higher level of concept in terms of what they were doing. But I think they probably would never have happened if Memphis hadn't happened first.

As for Gerrit Rietveld – he's a special hero. One thing that I really like is that he was a furniture maker first and became a brilliant conceptualist later. He was kind of pulled into that *De Stijl*[4] group and then the *Red-Blue Chair* became its iconic object. And then the other thing is that the *Red-Blue Chair* and really many of his designs are just so rigorous. You can do an incredible analysis of that chair – of every part and what it's doing – and there is not a single superfluous thing there. It's basically a machine for supporting two planes in space that then support a human body.

Given your *Folding Chair* in particular garnered a lot of interest and ended up in a lot of stylish Manhattan apartments, were you ever approached to take it into production? Has that pursuit been of interest to you?

Thinking back to the Venn diagram, I think one of those boundaries between the way that me and my peer group work in the field and then the design world is that difference between having pieces in production or just making them yourself in your workshop. For me, I'd love to have pieces in production. That would be great. It's just not the way that I've operated in the world.

And the *Folding Chair* was interesting because I was approached by an Italian company. We signed an agreement, I gave them all the plans and they played around with it and talked with the production people and they decided it's too complicated. But I have to say they were very honorable about the whole thing. I think in many ways they were right – it doesn't really lend itself to production. So I made the initial prototype and then I made a couple more prototypes. Then I did a run of six chairs and then did a couple runs of 12 chairs. So they were a sort of limited edition production (they weren't really editions though because the parts were the same, but then I always painted them differently).

They were ridiculously popular. I made them from something like 1982 to 1987 or 1988, but I didn't want to just keep making them. And so, I actually cut off the production run at 35.

Do you have contact with any of the people who own them?

Yes, lots of them. Some people have done nice things with them like donating them to museums.

I'd like to return to your two-part process – the relationship between structure and surface. What drives your approach to colour in your work?

In part, my attraction to colour owes some credit to Memphis, for making it *okay*. But, part of my attraction to colour is that even if you get all the woods in the world, the portion of the colour wheel that they cover is fairly narrow. I'm interested in using the whole colour wheel. I also like colour in contrast with wood. Sometimes everything on a piece is painted, but often I'm combining natural wood and paint.

And because I'm locating my work as handmade and one-off objects, I've tended to avoid doing things like using a spray gun. I work more with a brush in my hand. And I think, if you're going to make these ridiculously labour-intensive pieces that take so long to make, I'm not so interested in making it look polished and perfect. I'm more interested in letting it be irregular. Irregular in an appealing way, in the way that quilts might be lumpy and irregular but all the more compelling for their individuality.

I'm probably the most interested in the relationship between colours too. How the colours talk to each other. I rarely have a fully conceptualised way that all the colours are going to work. Sometimes I might have a general idea of what I'm trying to do, but more often I'm working with mixing colours and seeing how they interact with each other. So on a piece I'll have a lot of colours mixed up and I'll be experimenting with them and shifting them and putting down samples and seeing how they work together. People think my colours are bright, but they're not very bright. I think that sense of brightness is just from the way the colours are interacting with each other.

How do you like to think about movement and inviting interaction in your work?

Oh, well that goes all the way back to why I'm a furniture maker. When people see how much I like colour, they'll say, "Well, how come you don't just paint?" The reason why I enjoy working in the terrain of furniture so much is that it has a level of accessibility. People know what furniture is. They know how to approach it. They're not intimidated. It's not a painting on the wall that's hard to understand. And so I like that approachability of furniture – I like that everybody knows what a chair is. So, I think I try to get people to slow down and think and interact by playing with and undercutting that expectation, or building on the basic expectation and hopefully making it into something more interesting.

tomloeser.com

(Right)

"People think my colours are bright, but ... I think that sense of brightness is just from the way the colours are interacting..."
Image: Matthew Gordon Studio.

1 The architecture, design and art magazine founded by Gio Ponti and 'Barnabite father' (I can't add a footnote within a footnote, you will need to Google) Giovanni Semeria in 1928 in Milan.

2 Another Italian architecture and design magazine founded in Milan but a bit later, in 1961.

3 The Dutch design movement and collective was formed in 1993 by design historian Renny Ramakers and designer and educator Gijs Bakker. "Droog", which translates as "dry" in Dutch, points to the movement's humour and critical edge. Its output was characterised by the reimagining and reuse of everyday objects including Tejo Remy's *Accumulation of drawers without a cabinet* (if you don't know it by name, it's the stack of mismatched drawers held together by a tension strap).

4 Another Dutch design movement (translation: "The Style") but from way back in 1917. Primary colours, straight lines, rectangle planes, that sort of thing.

The Bench

Image: imageBROKER.com / Alamy Stock Photo.

A seat for collective wisdom.

WORDS KIRSTEN DRYSDALE

It starts with birds

They say that birdwatching is one of those things that creeps up on you. A sign that you've matured into a fully-fledged adult – or at least, officially entered your 30s. One minute, you're out all night drinking and dancing until the sun comes up – the next, you're in the morning sunshine pointing out honeyeaters and identifying a wonga pigeon by its call. You don't consciously develop this interest, it just emerges, a sudden alertness to the ubiquity and beauty of the world's winged creatures. They're everywhere when you start looking.

An eye for benches comes next. A deep appreciation for that simplest piece of urban furniture: a raised horizontal platform, put there for people to sit on. This is a perspective that can only be brought into focus by age, as some degree of physical weariness is necessary for a bench to become visible. A bench is a place to rest tired legs and aching knees and creaky hips. A place to contemplate the years, the moment, the meaning of life. One of the things you realise while sitting on a bench is that children don't seem to notice benches at all. Their parks and playgrounds often feature them but they are blind to the gift of a seat for their carers. Off they race to the monkey bars and the climbing net and the swings, defying gravity and fatigue while mums and dads and grandparents sit on the benches and watch, marvelling at their energy.

> The bench has been with us for thousands of years. Maybe not quite since the dawn of time – clues in skeletal remains suggest our cavemen ancestors preferred to squat than sit. But at some point in our evolution, hominids started favouring elevated butt rests over weight-bearing hyperflexion.

Public benches have been designed into our civic spaces since Ancient Greece. There are around 100 streetside benches in Pompeii, found in front of shops, bars and houses. Research suggests the citizens had pushed for them to be located "in shady spots", and objected to their placement in areas "where traffic would be obstructed". In 14th century Tuscany, benches were a standard feature in civic centres, while records from early modern Florence reveal "a rich culture and vocabulary of alfresco bench-sitting"[1]. The Florentine benches were grandiose, show-off pieces: stair-stepped forms built into the stone facades of the palaces of patrician families like the Medicis[2], who were quite deliberately mimicking the town square "as part of a strategy to designate their homes as new centers of civic authority".

> By the 19th century, you didn't need to have a palace to have a bench. The Industrial Revolution meant benches could be pumped out much more readily, out of cast iron – heavy, but a far more portable material than stone – and so they became an even more common feature in modern cities.

Now, you'll find benches in every society, in every part of the world, in all sorts of styles. A bench might have a backrest and armrests at the sides. It might be hand carved from stone or slapped together with old wooden pallet pieces or feature ornate camels and sphinxes at each end (you'll find plenty of these Egyptian-themed examples along the Victorian Embankment in London). A bench might be made of moulded plastic or reclaimed railway sleepers or lengths of bamboo. It doesn't matter - it's a bench. A blessed bench, right where it's needed, on the top of a hill, at a bend on the track, at the edge of a lake, in the foyer or at the station or on the wharf. You'll spot that bench and be flooded with gratitude, because you're old enough to need it.

1 For more on this, look up *Seats of Power: The Outdoor Benches of Early Modern Florence* by Yvonne Elet in the *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*. It's a fascinating look at the origins of outdoor public seating, and its place in the history of Western architecture and urbanism.

2 The Medici family was a hugely influential Italian banking and political dynasty during the Renaissance era. Along with other wealthy elite families, they financed some of the great artists and scientists of the time, including Donatello, Botticelli, Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo and Galileo.

Slowing down

The bench is a pause button. We tend to move through the world in a hurry, it's hard not to. Our public spaces are designed for mass transit, productivity, efficiency and consumption. Off we go, from here to there, doing this and buying that, checking timetables and taking phone calls and replying to messages and emails on our palm-sized computers. You've got 10 seconds to cross this road, don't forget that report is due tomorrow, neon signs and advertising scream for your attention, while caffeine and adrenaline courses through your veins.

A bench says no to all that. You can sit here a while. Stop. Just *be*. Watch the children play, or the fountain spray, or the world go by. A bench requires no power, or signal, or ticket to work. For elderly people especially, a bench is a ticket to social participation. It's the singular simple structure allowing them to be out in the world, when their limited mobility might otherwise keep them isolated. You see it especially in European cities, where the plaza benches are often full of white-haired men, sharing jokes and stories with each other, flirting with the women – young and old – who pass by, and solving the problems of the world. Their social lives depend on having somewhere to sit together. Some cities install specially designed seniors' benches in public areas, with a slightly raised seat height making it easier for those with stiffened joints to get down and back up again comfortably. There are even versions with gaps in the seat length, for wheelchairs or walking frames to slot into. The bench is there so that *you* can be here.

Art and Philosophy

Let's think, for a moment, about the relationship between *sitting* and *thinking* – specifically, the kind of serious, reflective thinking that comes with being still, not the active, pacing-the-room trying-to-remember-where-you-left-your-keys thinking. The world's most iconic expression of this act is *The Thinker* – a bronze sculpture[3] by Auguste Rodin from 1904. It shows a man, deep in thought, chin resting on his hand – and he is sitting. But Rodin's isn't the only sitting *Thinker*. There's also the *Thinker* from *Yehud*, a clay figurine on the handle of a jug discovered during an archaeological excavation in Israel, which dates to the Middle Bronze Age. There's *The Thinker and the Sitting Woman*, found in modern-day Romania but dating even further back to 5000BC and believed to be from the Hamangia culture.

When Michelangelo was commissioned to produce a tomb for Lorenzo de Medici[4], his sculpture of the Duke depicted him with finger to lips, in an "attitude of reflection and meditation".

All of these Thinkers have something in common: they are supporting their heads with their hands, and supporting their arms with their knees. You can't do that standing up.

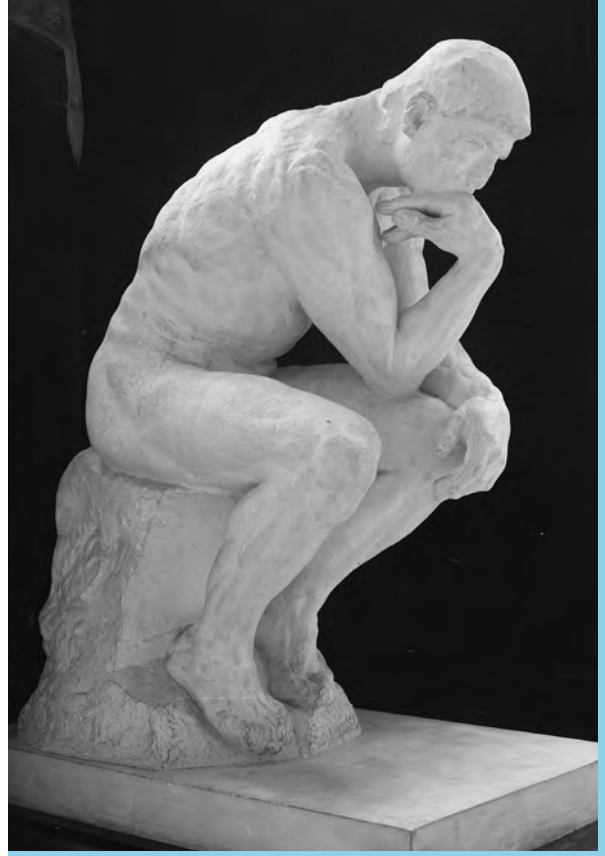
> Follow this logic through to the French philosopher René Descartes' dictum, "I think, therefore I am". If to *be* we need to *think*, and to *think* we need to *sit*, then a bench is a philosophical tool, supporting our very existence. A noble public good. And yet, people will graffiti phalluses all over them. We are not worthy!

Death

The memorial plaques frequently affixed to public benches are a further nudge in the philosophical direction. You read the name of some stranger, their dates of birth and death, and a poignant message about how loved they were. It doesn't mean much at first. But you sit a little longer, and you look back at the plaque, and your mind does a quick calculation to determine their age when they left this world. And then you are picturing a little boy, who didn't even make it to school, and you imagine his family and their pain. Or the number tells of a woman who nearly clocked a century, left behind 19 great-grandchildren and must have seen extraordinary things in her lifetime.

3 There are so many casts of this sculpture, found all around the world, that determining which counts as the true original is not entirely clear. Rodin produced the first small version in 1881 from plaster. Three years later, he made a small bronze version (which is currently held by the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne), while the first full-scale model (the one most people think of when they think of *The Thinker*) was presented in Paris in 1904 and now lives at the Musée Rodin. There are at least 28 large-scale bronze versions held in museums and public places worldwide, and countless other versions in different sizes and materials. So many Thinkers in the world! And yet, so many stupid things happening.

4 Yes, those Medicis (see Footnote 2).



(Top left)
The Thinker (Le Penseur), Auguste Rodin (1904). Image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

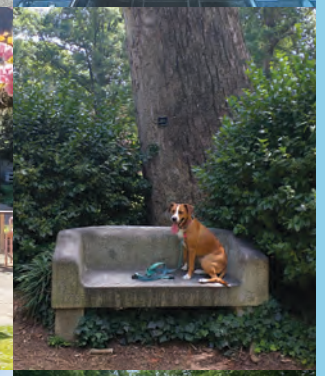
(Top right)
The Tomb of Lorenzo de' Medici from The Tombs of the Medici (1570) as rendered by Dutch engraver Cornelis Cort. Image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

(Right)
The Thinker of Yehud. Image: Clara Amit, courtesy of the Israel Antiquities Authority.

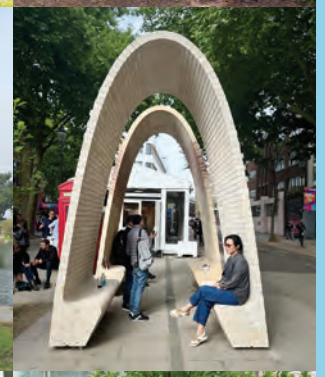














R lager



ONG WOMEN





FLÊRA BIRMANE



I love you so much you don't


Members get more
SOUTHBANK CENTRE
Membership






Coca-Cola



(Previous page)

Benches from the NTS community.

Row 1 (left-right): Ambelin Swan (Singapore), Emily Tham (Japan), Ambelin Swan (Singapore), Mathilde Serre Mays (Japan), Siew Jen Chee (Malaysia), Milana Femić (Italy), Milana Femić (Spain), Milana Femić (Serbia).

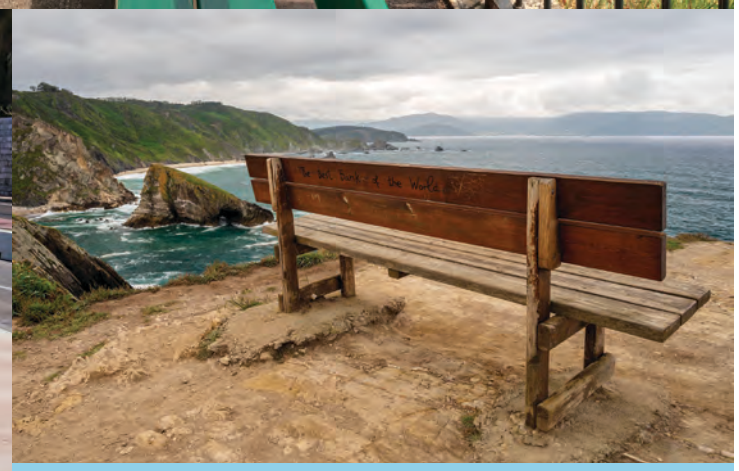
Row 2 (left-right): Anastasija Djordjević (Australia), Anastasija Djordjević (Australia), Annelies Chávez (Belgium), Austin Whitehead (USA), Nikita Palkov (Latvia), cris8bit (Australia), Scroll_ua (Austria), Shahd Ali (UAE).

Row 3 (left-right): Austin Whitehead (USA), Emily Tham (Switzerland), Dr. Sindhu Ann Korah (USA), Aileen Lord (UK), M.J. Gustafson (USA), Emerald Chia-hsin Chen (UK), Pinakesh De (India), Namsai Cheong (Japan).

Row 4 (left-right): Gilad Bar (Austria), Jan L (China), Jüan Wang (Norway), Elise Lemaire (Belgium), Filip Tomic (Switzerland), Mariana Sarto (Argentina), Namsai Cheong (Japan), Paige Ashley Sia Pei Sun (Japan).

Row 5 (left-right): Kamil Wojcik (Finland), Korinne Taloza (Philippines), Ellen Palacios Mendoza (Italy), Candyce Richards (South Africa), Mariana Sarto (Denmark), Mariana Sarto (France), Milana Femić (Serbia), Luigi Ricciardi (Japan).

The wooden bench in Geneva that stretches for 120 metres along the chestnut-tree-lined Promenade de la Treille. Image: Cristian Mihaila / Alamy Stock Photo.



(Above)

"The Best Bench on the World" overlooking the Atlantic Ocean, in Spain's northern Galicia region. Image: Marcos del Mazo / Alamy Stock Photo.

(Left)

"The longest concrete bench" stretches along Marseille's scenic waterfront. Image: GIORDANO MICHELE / Alamy Stock Photo.

(Above right and page 188-189)

Paul Cocksedge's public art installation *Please Be Seated*. Image: Mark Cocksedge.

You imagine these strangers, grieve for their ghosts, and you take in the scene around you and relish it. The bench reminds you that you and everyone you know will die.

Mortality is a good thing to be reminded of. The agony and the ecstasy of life are fleeting. We are so lucky to be here, at all.

Community and competition

Whatever it is made of, a bench is – by its very nature and above all else – communal. What makes a bench a bench and not a mere chair is its length – the fact it is designed for more than one person to sit on. Things you may not even think of as benches, are in their essence, benches. Church pews. Sportsfield dugouts. Bus stop 'leaners'[5]. A plank of wood resting on a couple of milk crates at a backyard bonfire? That's an instant bench, for you and all your friends. Benches bring people together. Cheek-to-cheek, in both senses.

There are many claims to the longest bench in the world – different places specify their own criteria to try to claim the title. Longest *wooden* bench (Appenzell, Switzerland; 1013.32m), longest *concrete* bench (Marseille, France; 3km), longest *painted* bench (Moscow, Russia; 302m - but now broken into segments around the city). Longest doesn't mean the *best*, of course. And for that measure, there are many contenders. There's a beautiful bench in Geneva, stretching 120 metres along the Promenade de la Treille, which is lined with chestnut trees. Since the 1700s people have sat on this bench to take in the views of the Salève and Jura mountains. There's a bench in Japan, 460m long (it officially held the Guinness World Record in 1989) on the Masuhogaura Coast, from where you can watch the sunset on the Sea of Japan. There's a bench on a clifftop in the Spanish village of Ortigueira which is literally called "The Best Bench in the World" (well, *el mejor banco del mundo*) – a band visiting the region for a music festival in 2010 graffitied that onto the back of it, and then the Spanish Ministry of Industry made it official, putting it on tourist signs and maps.

Yoga and spikes

Modern benches offer contemporary twists on the age-old design. In Belgium, there are benches with built-in solar panels. You can sit in the sun while you charge your device and use the city's free WiFi. A snake-like bench in Rome, designed by architect and yoga instructor Robyne Kassen, is made of wood frames covered in a canvas-coated concrete and formed into what she calls the "Infinity System": a series of graduated angles to supportively fold your body into various contortions and positions. A huge public art installation called "Please Be Seated" by Paul Cocksedge[6] features three rings of benches made of scaffolding planks, each rising and falling in a waveform. The low points flatten out into bench seating, while the high points form arches providing shelter and access to the inner rings. After debuting in London, the work toured mainland China and is now permanently located in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region – it can probably claim the record for the world's *most-travelled* bench.

5 'Leaners' are perhaps the most controversial evolution of the bench – these raised and angled railings are installed at "derrière height" in places where high foot traffic puts space at a premium. People hate them. A perch is for parrots, not people!

6 Cocksedge has come up with quite a few novel interpretations of the bench – a similar structure titled "Time Loop" made of infinite loops of timber is also in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, while a 2011 project for Beijing Design Week titled "Manuscript" used huge curls of red steel inscribed with poetry, on which visitors could sit or lie down.

There are, sadly, less friendly iterations of public benches, too. Those divided by arm rests to prevent people from stretching out to sleep on them, or made from deliberately uncomfortable material to stop anyone loitering too long, or designed with awkwardly arched seats that you can't fully relax into (they do offer a good core workout, though). In one Tokyo neighbourhood, city authorities have "partially closed" benches by attaching orange traffic poles to them with cable ties, in an effort to deter nighttime drinkers. (These are all examples of "hostile architecture" – structures designed to repel people, or to discourage particular behaviours. Very much *not* in the spirit of a bench.) Not all bench horror stories are true, though – the internet will tell you that in China, the government has installed coin-operated park benches which you must pay to use, with spikes that emerge from the seat when your time runs out. But this, it seems, is an unfounded rumour stemming from the very *real* project of a German artist, Fabian Brunsing: in 2008 he built such a bench as an art installation, called "Pay & Sit: the private bench"[7]. It was intended as a protest piece, a comment on capitalism and the commercialisation of public space. That enough people have found it plausible that a government really *would* do such a thing perhaps proves his point.

7 You can find video of his coin-operated bench online – and while you're there, you'll notice that *all* the images and video purportedly of the Chinese version are actually of Brunsing's contraption. If in 15 years since the claim was made, not a single authentic image has emerged of the state-sanctioned spiky benches, it's probably fair to assume they don't exist.

(Above)
Artist Fabian Brunsing's Pay & Sit installation. Image courtesy of Fabian Brunsing.

(Left)
A subtly hostile public bench. Image: Architecopoles / Alamy Stock Photo.

Picture it

A good bench makes a great picture. The influential American photographer Diane Arbus knew this better than just about anyone. She became best known for her affectionate portraits of "freaks" – people on the fringes of society, but it is notable how many of her images were of ordinary people sitting on benches. Their titles are somehow as simply evocative as the photographs themselves:

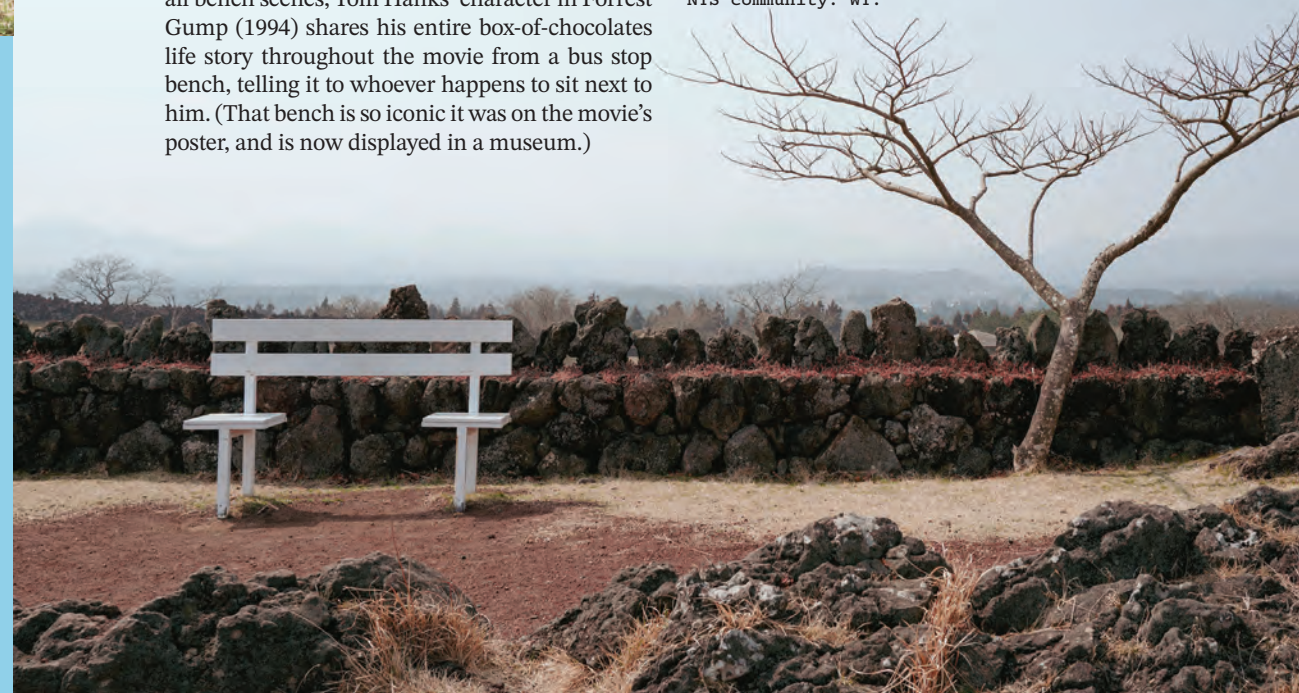
Old couple on a bench at night, Santa Monica, Cal., 1962
Teenage boy on a bench in Central Park, N.Y.C., 1962
Man and a boy on a bench in Central Park, N.Y.C., 1962
Susan Sontag and her son on bench, N.Y.C., 1965
Elderly couple on a park bench, N.Y.C. 1969
Young Puerto Rican couple on a bench, N.Y.C, 1965
Seated young couple on a park bench, N.Y.C. , 1962
Woman on a park bench on a sunny day, N.Y.C., 1969

Movie makers see the same thing Arbus did. A bench is an irresistible visual motif for life itself. Think of how many poignant scenes take place in this most basic setting:

Good Will Hunting (1997) - wise Robin Williams gives young upstart Matt Damon some brutal home truths while the pair sit on a bench at a duck pond. (You can sit on that bench yourself at the Boston Public Gardens.) Notting Hill (1999) – a world-famous actress (Julia Roberts) and bookshop owner (Hugh Grant) approach a garden bench bearing the inscription of a lifelong couple, as their own unlikely romance is blossoming. And of course, the bench scene of all bench scenes, Tom Hanks' character in Forrest Gump (1994) shares his entire box-of-chocolates life story throughout the movie from a bus stop bench, telling it to whoever happens to sit next to him. (That bench is so iconic it was on the movie's poster, and is now displayed in a museum.)

(Above)
A public bench in Kuala Lumpur submitted by a member of the NTS community: Ambelin Swan.

(Below)
A bench in Jeju, South Korea submitted by a member of the NTS community: WT.



WORDS BEC VRANA DICKINSON

THE LIGHT SIDE OF THE DARK SIDE

SOME LIVED EXPERIENCE AND EXPERT ADVICE FOR BETTER EMBRACING A LOW-LIT HOME.

The combination of mirrored surfaces, ambient lighting, rich textiles and vibrant artwork add interest to a low-lit corner in Nicholas Gurney's *The Warren*. Image: Michael Wee.

To avoid eating my own words, I now close every absolute statement with "but never say never". This is just in case I find myself once again trying to squeezing a queen-size mattress into a south-facing* shoebox of a bedroom.

* 'South-facing' *being the least desirable aspect for a room, flat or house in the southern hemisphere, given that it receives the least amount of sunlight. For those in the northern hemisphere, this would clearly be your 'north-facing', so to avoid confusion, from now on, we'll be fondly referring to this aspect as* 'The Dark Side'.

During one of my more desperate flat-hunts, any amenity beyond a flushing toilet was a bonus. With my rose-coloured glasses firmly on, I decided a ground-floor flat, tucked at the back of a narrow Art Deco block in Sydney's east, wasn't dank, or a certain trigger for seasonal mood-swings. It was, as advertised – "cosy"! Especially my room. Tight enough that I could kiss both walls when I rolled over in bed, and dim enough that the window sill could be stacked high with books without any fear of compromising its single source of natural light. I quickly adapted to my cave-den. I learnt how to make my bed while still lying in it, and how to eject myself onto the tiny patch of floor-space without disturbing my fine work. On a good day, I'd stick the landing and hit the on-switch of my floor lamp on the way down. Cloaked in a brown silk scarf to soften the bright bulb, its glow would softly illuminate my intimate confines. I liked to complain to friends and family for drama, but truthfully, I felt oddly content. Coddled even. I remember sleeping very well. The ideal levels of light deprivation for melatonin production, perhaps.

This period of my life happened to coincide with a friend's entry into the housing market. I was eager to understand the details. Like, "what are you listening for when you knock on walls?" and "why is *aspect* such a dealbreaker for you?". I thought about my dimly-lit cave and my acclimatisation to The Dark Side. I admired her ambitious sun-seeking property preferences because, in theory, this would reduce her options by at least 25 per cent. So, from my cave, I began to brew some gentle scepticism. My friend now lives in a dappled two-bedder on The Light Side.

Thankfully, I've since seen the light. And felt it too. The warm serotonin release standing in a kitchen gently bathed in the rays of the rising sun … the satisfaction of turning sausages on a barbeque perfectly positioned to snatch every last setting ray. Much like a shadow never staying still, I'm aware of how fleeting this experience of light can be. Fortunately, my fondness for The Dark Side is still well intact, but it's still not *desirable*, is it?

Given many of us don't have the luxury of choice or control over how much sun our home sees, I wonder if we all need to learn how to better embrace The Dark Side?

Sydney-based small space designer Nicholas Gurney gets it and has made a career out of transforming compact spaces (sometimes with less-than-ideal amounts of natural light) into clever and considered homes. And in his opinion, The Light Side has its downsides too, based on his lived experience ("Seven years in an oven … one of those apartments with

A strategically placed mirror, contrasting colours and textures that interact with light in different ways help to make the entrance of ATOMAA's *Urban Nook* come "alive". Image: Francesco Carredda.

The design of ATOMAA's *Urban Nook* uses warm, ambient lighting to create a space that is inviting, whilst embracing its more "silent and meditative dimensions". Image: Francesco Carredda.

windows limited to a single wall"). If a space is lacking light, "focus on texture and natural timbers – both in construction and furniture – to imbue a sense of warmth, like tonal palettes with hand plastered walls," Nicholas advises.

Cesare Galligani, co-founder of Milan-based architectural firm ATOMAA in Milan, agrees. "Light clings to the roughness of surfaces that scratch; the material is alive and becomes tactile". No stranger to darkness, for ATOMAA's smallest apartment to date, (*So Far the Tiniest*), the team took on a windowless bathroom, approaching the space like a spa. "We tried to recreate the sensation of Turkish hammams, where diffused light illuminates [the space] from above and focused artificial light highlights the surfaces".

Big on strategic lighting, lamps and avoiding downlights, Nicholas has no hesitation in pairing smart artificial lighting with what light is available, even in the daytime. "The outcome moves the global ambience toward brightness, but also shifts the temperature of light to where it is more comfortable".

In spaces that allow more structural intervention, Cesare recommends openness to let the limited light circulate freely. "Eliminate walls, transform storage volumes into sculptural totems, and use pivot doors. Add mirrors where you least expect them".

Then it just comes to plain rethinking. Instead of dancing around the dark, Nicholas urges us to dance *in* it (in a metaphorical sense). "Get cosy and align with all things *hygge*, it certainly works for the Danes," he says. Blankets, cushions, rugs, or even just applying an overarching softness to dimly lit spaces can make all the difference. *The Dark Side*, he says, "has a beautiful diffused and tranquil quality that's remarkably consistent ... I think you can unlock a stillness and calmness afforded by this light that's unique to spaces of this orientation".

Designing many environments lit purely by the cooler northern-hemisphere light, Cesare and the ATOMAA team have learnt to embrace what they see as more "silent and meditative dimensions". Low-lit zones can become the ideal space for an entrance, study nook and even a living room with details that use shadow to create interest, like alcoves, timber panelling, or even a moody deep-blue wall. "We like to imagine the living room as an area for pause and relaxation, the fire cracking, long winter films and crunching popcorn. The northern [Dark Side] light, a calm, untiring presence, like in some paintings of Vermeer."

I like this reference to Johannes Vermeer, a Dutch painter known for his intimate homelife scenes. In his paintings *The Dark Side* has been harnessed and heralded. I've since read that many artists, including Leonardo da Vinci no less, preferred studios with this aspect for its steady (and likely calming) light throughout the day, less prone to dynamic shifts and shadows that would see *The Mona Lisa* restarted every hour.

More than happy to reframe my past cave as an artist's ideal, my cave period did something else, too. Its dimness made every light space I've lived in since feel positively incandescent. A little lesson on the value of contrast. As Cesare puts it: "beauty resides in this duality: the freedom to experience and feel both ends of the spectrum". You hear that, *Dark Side*? "Beauty". Don't forget Nicholas also said "tranquil". Adjectives *The Dark Side* thought it'd never be called. But never say never.

BUILT FOR BELONGING

WORDS KIRSTY MUNRO

WHAT IF THE SOLUTION TO THE HOUSING CRISIS ISN'T JUST BUILDING FASTER OR CHEAPER, BUT BUILDING DIFFERENTLY, WITH COMMUNITY AT THE CORE?

In a housing landscape often dominated by aesthetics, economics and efficiency, Dutch architecture firm SOME architects (formerly heren 5) is quietly leading a revolution – one grounded in empathy, collaboration, and human-scale design. Their approach challenges traditional top-down processes by deeply involving future residents, favouring shared spaces, and designing for real lives, not just floor plans. In this conversation, they share how community participation, research and a willingness to let go of ego lead to more inclusive and joyful urban living.

"The practice was founded over 30 years ago," says partner architect Sjuul Cluitmans, "and over time, we shifted our methodology from what we wanted to design, to who we were designing for." That simple but radical shift has guided their evolution. The new name, SOME architects, reflects this change in ethos. 'heren 5' – which translates to 'five gentlemen' – once nodded to the studio's founders. But as the team grew more diverse and socially focused, the name felt increasingly out of step. 'SOME' stands for 'Social Method', a more accurate expression of their collaborative, purpose-driven process. "It's about listening first," says Sjuul, "and letting design grow from what people actually need."

Listening is SOME's superpower. Whether designing for seniors, single parents or young adults, their projects begin not with plans but with conversations. "People are eager to be heard and that enthusiasm feeds our design process," says Sjuul.

They conduct deep research into social trends, like the patterns of aging populations in Dutch cities, and host neighbourhood sessions to understand what people love (and hate) about where they live. "It's not just about statistics," says architect Marilu de Bies. "It's about how people actually use space. Where they sit. How they connect."

That social philosophy is embodied in *Stadsveteraan020*, a complex of 110 apartments with 150 inhabitants, near the Amstel River in Amsterdam. It is designed for the growing number of people aged over 55 who want to stay living independently in this vibrant city, and want to decide how they grow old. Research has found that seniors who live together in a residential community continue to live independently for longer. They can rely on each other and be self-reliant together. Like a village within a building, it features wide, light-filled corridors with benches that double as social streets. Balconies overlook the street or a central garden, to motivate people to get out of their apartments and interact with their neighbours.While most of the apartments are for single use, their research uncovered a growing trend of groups of friends who want to live together as they grow older; like *The Golden Girls*, but with cooler furniture.

Community spaces don't need to be large to be meaningful. Often, they'll divide bigger buildings into smaller blocks, which they call "little neighbourhoods" with shared spaces on different floors to encourage movement: an art room here, a laundry space there, a sunlit terrace by the river. It comes from their research that finds that the smaller the neighbourhood, the better you get to know each other.

"The communal spaces are not over designed," says Marilu. "We give the residents the freedom to decide how they will use those spaces, and how they want to form a community."

(Left)

The SOME team.

(Pages 202-203)

Designed for multi-generational living, *De Eenhoorn* brings diverse residents together through architecture that fosters joy and connection.

(Above)

Balconies overlooking garden spaces encourage residents outside for fresh air or to socialise at *Stadsveteraan020*.

(Right)

At *Stadsveteraan020* "The communal spaces are not over designed," says Marilu. "We give the residents the freedom to decide how they will use those spaces, and how they want to form a community."

Images: Leonard Fäustle.

Flexible floor plans allow residents to adapt spaces to their needs and interests.

There are subtle nods to social engineering (in the nicest way): the apartments don't have washing machines, so the communal laundry becomes a natural, low-stakes meeting place; likewise, the bicycle parking is accessed through a central lobby, increasing the likelihood someone will say "hallo" as you wheel through.

> "You can't just build a big communal living room and expect people to become best friends," says Marilu. "But you can design for natural encounters; for small, repeated moments that create a sense of belonging."

The results can be seen in the shared garden, buzzing with conversations on a sunny day; the group of women who take a dip in the Amstel River every morning, the daily running group, the impromptu jam sessions and even occasional 'disco nights' in the culture room.

Their research also found that many elderly residents don't want to live only among other elderly people. They prefer mixed communities and younger people value that too. It turns out that families, seniors and single residents often want similar things: meaningful interaction, a sense of belonging, and adaptable, welcoming spaces.

• • •

(Above and left)

"The results can be seen in the shared garden, buzzing with conversations on a sunny day; the group of women who take a dip in the Amstel River every morning, the daily running group, the impromptu jam sessions and even occasional 'disco nights' in the culture room" at *Stadsveteraan020*.

Images: Leonard Fäustle.

De Eenhoorn is a standout example of their research insights. Designed for multi-generational living, the project brings diverse residents together through architecture that fosters joy and connection. The team worked with a local artist to embed playfulness into the architecture itself: Michiel Schuurman designed colourful glass windows for the entrance to one building, and concrete paving with a winding racetrack pattern for the other. You can just imagine kids driving their toy cars around the "circuit." The housing is divided into two low blocks totalling 178 apartments, arranged around courtyards and surrounded by car-free public land. On the ground floor, families have direct access to the outdoors so that children can play safely; above them, seniors enjoy views of a shared courtyard, and young people living in their first homes are on the top floor, accessed through the garden to encourage more interaction.

(Below)

Nestelen in de stad is an apartment building that the SOME team has drawn heavily on via its research. Image: Leonard Fäustle.

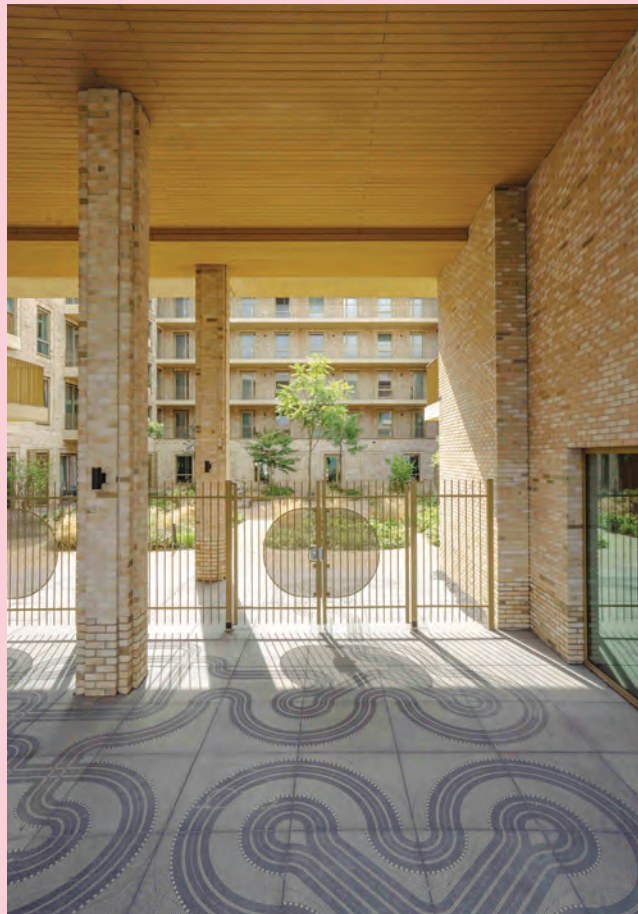
"The apartments in *De Eenhoorn* were quite compact, so we wanted to create as much light as possible...". Image: Leonard Fäustle.

(Above)

Residents socialising at *De Eenhoorn*. Image: Leonard Fäustle.

(Right and above far left)

SOME worked with local artist Michiel Schuurman to embed playfulness into the architecture itself with colourful glass windows for the entrance to one building, and concrete paving with a winding racetrack pattern for the other. Images: Michiel Schuurman.



(Left)

Kitchens and stairwells were centralised in the *Houthaven* project to minimise the footprint of each apartment and make floor plans more efficient. Image: Leonard Fäustle.

(Below right)

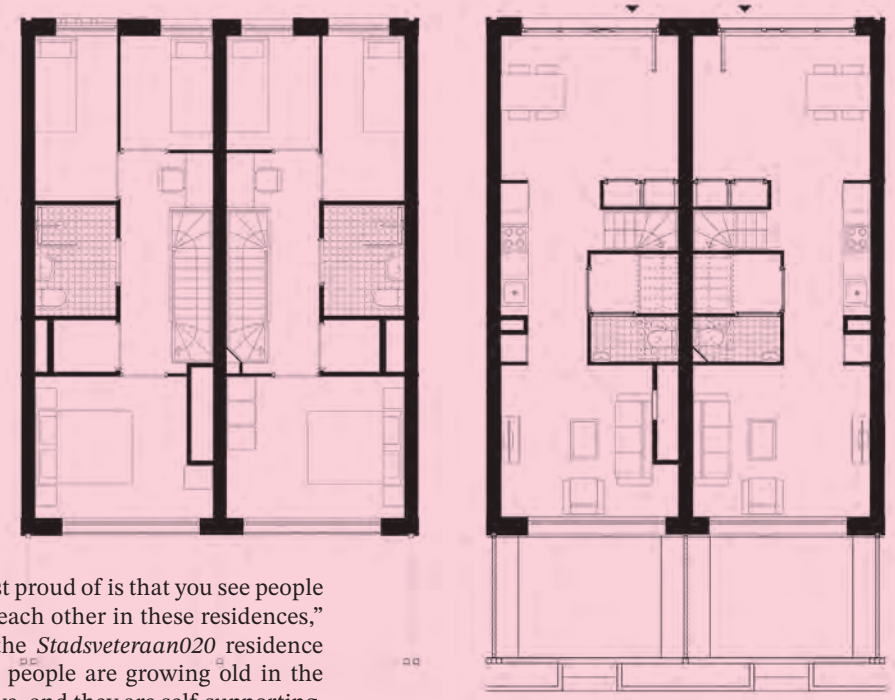
Helden van de Houthaven: families have access to safe spaces for children to play from their ground floor apartments. Image: Leonard Fäustle.

(Above)

Flexible floor plans allow residents to adapt them to their growing families in *Helden van de Houthaven*. Image: Leonard Fäustle.

(Right)

Helden van de Houthaven, a development of family apartments along Amsterdam's waterfront, echoes the brick warehouses that once lined the docks, grounding the new in the area's history. Image: Luuk Kramer.



"What I am most proud of is that you see people looking out for each other in these residences," says Sjuul. Of the *Stadsveteraan020* residence he says, "These people are growing old in the city that they love, and they are self-supporting. We added details like different colour schemes to help those with dementia recognise their floor, but the sense of community means they also have support from their neighbours. We heard about one lady who broke her leg, so she left her front door open while she recovered so that the community members could check on her, bring her meals and so on. That's when you know the architecture is working – when it invites connection in small, everyday ways."

And while their designs are flexible and future-oriented, they're also deeply rooted in place. "We often talk about 'rooted architecture'," says Sjuul. "Buildings that feel like they belong – through materials, scale, texture." *Helden van de Houthaven*, a development of family apartments along Amsterdam's waterfront, echoes the brick warehouses that once lined the docks, grounding the new in the area's history. *Stadsveteraan020* stands out for its beautiful, textured bricks that invite touch. "There's a Dutch word, *aaibaar*, which roughly means 'as if you could stroke a building.' Explains Sjuul. "That kind of emotional connection matters." These details aren't just aesthetic – they help residents feel part of the wider community, and proud of where they live. In Dutch cities, social and commercial projects need to be integrated. These residences could easily be mistaken for luxury commercial projects. But what truly sets them apart is the atmosphere within: residents who are lively, connected, and visibly at home.

Sometimes belonging means adjusting the outward appearance to meet government guidelines. For the *De Houten Leeuw* project, the team built sustainable housing for young people, using wood as the key material. A cascading staircase crosses through every part of the building, encouraging social interaction. Wide verandas face west to catch the sun and provide a pleasant place to socialise. The whole building has detachable connections so it can be taken apart and relocated, or so the wood can be used for other purposes. "It's sustainable, efficient, and social," says Sjuul. "It brings everything we believe into one place." However, the local heritage committee felt the timber façade would stand out too much, so they plastered it to better match the neighborhood. "It was still sustainable, still beautiful – but more in tune with its context," says Marilu.

• • •

(Above)

Drawings of the apartment floor plans for *Helden van de Houthaven* that demonstrate the efficiencies created by centralising the kitchens and stairwells. Image: SOME architects.

De Houten Leeuw is a sustainable, efficient and social housing development for young people. A cascading staircase crosses through every part of the building, encouraging social interaction. Wide verandas face west to catch the sun and provide a pleasant place to socialise. The whole building has detachable connections so it can be taken apart and relocated, or so the wood can be used for other purposes. Image: Leonard Fäustle.

The laundry room in *De Eenhoorn* has the perfect acoustics for a jam session. Image: Leonard Fäustle.

Since most of their clients are housing corporations, the team balances tight budgets and density demands with their advocacy for shared space. “At *De Eenhoorn*, only two per cent of the total area was communal,” says Sjuul. “At *Stadsveteraan020* it was five percent. But even 500 square metres can go a long way if you divide it smartly.”

That smartness is evident in every detail – from staircases positioned to promote those all-important chance encounters to large, well-placed windows that draw people toward green space and each other. Kitchens and stairwells were deliberately centralised in the *Houthaven* project to minimise the footprint of each apartment and make the overall floor plan more efficient. By consolidating these fixed elements, the design frees up the surrounding space, allowing rooms to be adapted to residents’ changing needs. “Flexibility is crucial,” says Marilu. “Rather than a big kitchen that you rarely use, you create these smaller, functional spaces that can overlap, which frees up space for other uses.” In their research, they found that elderly people in particular “have a lot of stuff,” so making floor plans flexible and incorporating good storage was important.

Beyond light and ventilation, windows can shape how we feel, how we live, and how we connect with the world outside. They can open up a space – and a worldview. “The apartments in *De Eenhoorn* were quite compact, so we wanted to create as much light as possible, to avoid a claustrophobic feeling,” says Marilu. The placement of windows in their projects is influenced by natural daylight and the seasons, but also by function – and the timing of that function. A bedroom needs less natural light, while a living room needs more. Sjuul mentions one of the residents they interviewed; “He said, ‘a living space doesn’t have to be big, as long as the view is grand!’ So we try to capture a view: of a river, a garden, a landscape or a wide expanse of sky.”

Their designs also reflect the unexpected joy of shared routines: laundry rooms that double as band practice spaces, bike storage that becomes a social threshold. “When you remove a washing machine from an apartment, you don’t just free up space,” says Sjuul. “You create an opportunity for connection.”

Some of the most surprising successes have come when residents make the architecture their own (the residents’ discovery that the laundry room in *De Eenhoorn* has the perfect acoustics for a jam session being one such example). And at *De Vrije Kade,* a mixed development of apartments, single-family homes, and commercial facilities, the team turned a former brick warehouse into a large mobility hub, with parking for vehicles. The idea was to create car-free streets around the development by removing on-street parking. While the residents do use the garage for their cars, it has also become a venue for ad hoc group workouts and weekend barbecues. “We never predicted that,” says Sjuul, “but it’s the best kind of feedback.”

some.eu

INTERVIEW ELOÏSE LACHICORÉE

IMAGES ALEXANDER SEVERIN

LOVE AT FIRST PEPPER MILL

Charismatic, elegant, a bit mysterious... transcendent. Not qualities you would typically attribute to the humble pepper mill. But these are not your average pepper mills. When New York-based couple **Maren Lankford** and **Alexander Severin** first encountered one of **Jens Harald Quistgaard**'s (JHQ) peppermills, they were awestruck, and lovestruck too. Since that fateful meeting in 2015, they have amassed a 60-piece strong collection of these exquisite objects that the Danish designer and sculptor designed for Dansk. They have painstakingly documented and classified their pieces (assigning nicknames to each one) and – as an act of public service for other design and pepper mill enthusiasts – share details of the series' origin, design and evolution on their website: **The Peppermills of Jens Quistgaard**.

(Left)
Jens Quistgaard (pictured in his home), was Dansk Designs' principal designer during the 1950s-1980s. Image: The Cary Graphic Arts Collection, courtesy of Alexander Severin.

(Above)
The Vanguard mill: Maren and Alexander's first experience of JHQ's designs.

(Right)
Maren and Alexander with their 60-piece collection of JHQ pepper mills in their New York apartment.

Could you tell us the story of how you first encountered Jens Quistgaard's pepper mills?

We first saw a Quistgaard mill in an antiques store in Copenhagen in 2015. We had spent an almost embarrassing amount of time perusing the Roxy Klassik warehouse, which feels a bit like an encyclopedia of Danish Modern design. After seeing all the chairs and tables we could imagine, we started looking for smaller objects we could purchase as a souvenir. That's when we first came upon the Vanguard mill by JHQ. This object stood apart. Without knowing anything about it, we were drawn to its high level of craftsmanship and elegance. We asked the sales staff about it and got a couple of raised eyebrows. Since these pepper mills were made for the American market, finding them in Denmark is a bit unusual. After a bit of a chuckle that folks from New York had to go all the way to Copenhagen to find one of these mills, the friendly staff gave us our first primer on Quistgaard.

How did this first encounter progress to setting up a website?

When we got home, we started to look more into JHQ and his work. This was in 2015 and there wasn't much information available online. It soon became clear that JHQ's pepper mill series was particularly under-represented. We pieced together what we could from the scraps of information we could find: auction websites, Facebook posts, etc. Luckily, there was a book *Danish Pepper: Jens Quistgaard's Teak Pepper Mills* by Mark Perlson, specifically about the pepper mills. Furthermore, we found a defunct Wiki page created by Todd Pederzani via the Wayback Machine. These two sources gave us a first look at the extent of this collection. Even still, we wanted to expand on those bodies of information and make a more user-friendly collector's guide. We began to think seriously about making our guide around the start of the [Covid] pandemic lockdowns. Our collection was pretty fleshed out and we had a lot of time on our hands. So we got to planning and delved into more serious research, reaching out to lots of folks who could help us piece this story together. Then came photoshoots, drawings, putting together a website, which are luckily all things we'd done before.

How did Jens Quistgaard's design philosophy play a role in piquing your interest?

We are awestruck by the dedication to experimentation that underpins JHQ's design output. According to the wonderful and definitive book *Jens Quistgaard: The Sculpting Designer* by Stig Guldberg, Quistgaard regarded designing pepper mills as creative play. Each object is engaging, charismatic, a bit mysterious, and solves a specific design problem in a resourceful way. All together, these objects represent a dedication to a process of invention, discovery, iteration and optimism that we find transcendent. We see this as aspirational for our own lives – to find an activity from which we glean this kind of joy.

What is it about their design that holds such enduring appeal, do you think?

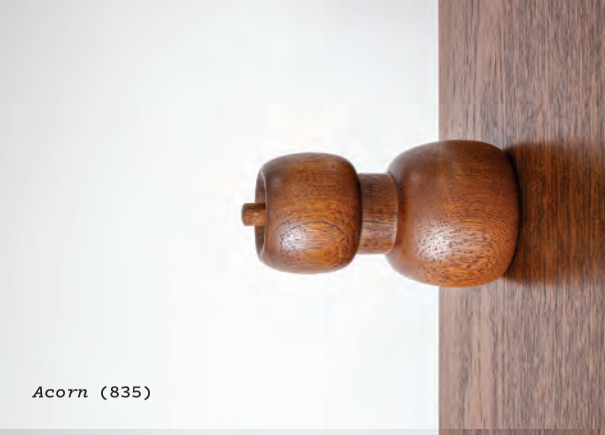
This collection of objects has a few ways to draw people in. To those who like craftsmanship, there is no end of it here. The shapes of the mills are somewhat familiar, drawing on a variety of references in an inventive way. As JHQ himself mused, each object was created as a whimsical centrepiece for your table.

> *Unlike the other objects on your table, which are meant mostly to be used by an individual, a pepper mill is meant to be passed around, held and used by everyone.*

And apart from the appeal of each mill, when arrayed, they create endlessly wonderful compositions. When photographing our collection, one of our favorite activities was arranging the mills into groups, and considering how each shape plays off its counterparts.

Orb (1614)

Double Barrel (824)



Acorn (835)

Scalloped Cone

Bullet (858)

Cylinder and Sphere (877)

Bowtie - Medium (856)

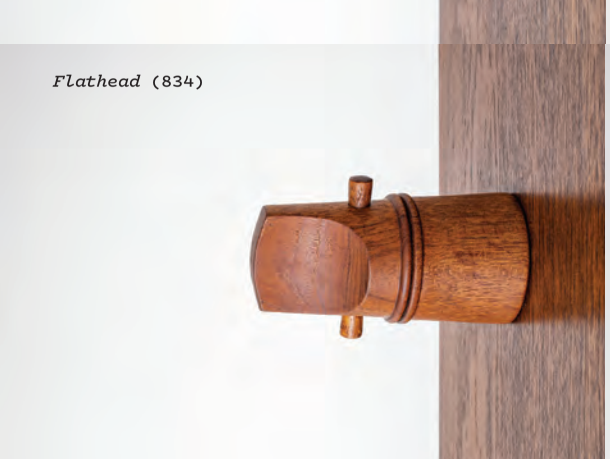
Eyelet (857)

Double Cube (1624)

Druuge

Cylinder and Cube (898)

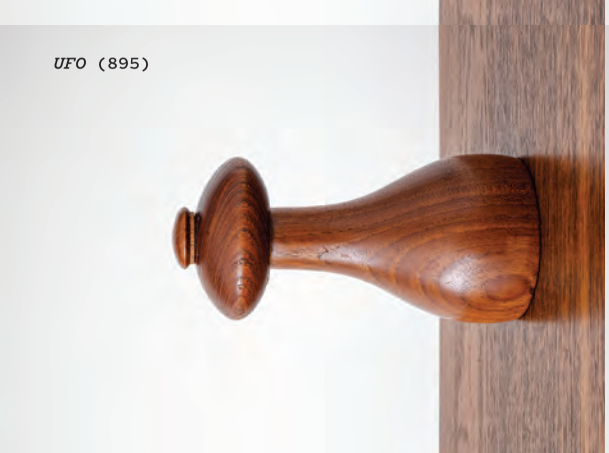
Bird Beak (894)



Flathead (834)

Eyeliner

Pear Core (1611)



UFO (895)

Four Donuts (897)

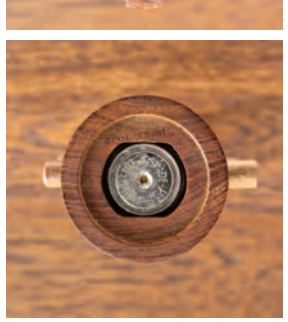
Chess King (891)

(Left)

Spool with Ceramic Top. Wenge and Relief ceramic pattern (left). Pao Rosa and Azur ceramic pattern (right).

(Below)

Along with the mills' aesthetic design details, the grinder mechanisms evolved as the collection grew. Including: the early all-metal grinders (top left, bottom right), the second generation transitional grinders (top right, bottom left), and more recent plastic grinders.



(Above)

A Dansk Designs advertisement for a 'Teak Salt/Peppermill Promotion' featuring a range of designs, including: the Vanguard, Eyelet, Hourglass with Lip and Carafe. Image: Dansk Designs archives courtesy of Alexander Severin.

(Right)

A 1964 Dansk Designs 'Meet Wenge' advertisement, one of their rare wood product lines. Image: Dansk Designs courtesy of Alexander Severin.

(Below)

Rosewood and Silver: A second special edition series of designs in staved rosewood. Pieces from this collection continue to be some of the most expensive JHQ mills in the resale market.

Could you tell us briefly about the production process and materials used in the making of the mills?

Most of the JHQ mills are made of teak. During the beginning of the production run of this series, they were produced in Denmark. Later on, production moved overseas. In addition to teak, several special editions of mills were produced in more exotic and rare woods: wenge, palisander, mutenye, etc.

Quistgaard's designs for Dansk are particularly popular in the US. Why do you think this is the case?

There is a concrete reason for JHQ's success in the US. Dansk, the company that produced most of JHQ's designs, was founded by Ted and Martha Nierenberg in Long Island and aimed specifically at the American market. Dansk was created with the forethought to take advantage of the expanding postwar homewares market and in a way became the exemplar of Danish Modern design for many Americans of that generation. Naming the company "Dansk" was a brilliant touch. To this day, everyone assumes it's a Danish company!

What does your process in sourcing new designs entail?

We pieced together most of our collection through eBay and Etsy. Our biggest piece of advice for those just starting to collect: pay attention to the grinders of the mills. We don't have specific dates to these mills, unfortunately, but on our website we have a guide to dating the sequence of production based on grinder type.

What would you like to share with people through the work of this collection?

We created our website with the hopes of helping fellow collectors organise their efforts and to generally promote and celebrate this niche of JHQ's prolific output. When we got started, we struggled to find reliable information. So we hope we're doing a decent job of creating a repository of content and we're always looking for fresh info. (Dear reader, if you have any insight, please share!)

Are there any designs from the series that you would love to acquire?

We are missing a few pieces from JHQ's oeuvre. At this point, we're just missing the rarest of the rare. And we're okay with that!

What are each of your favourite designs from this series?

It's hard to pick a favourite mill. We just love the totality.

How would you best describe a Jens Quistgaard pepper mill?

It's hard to say exactly what makes a JHQ mill. But you know it when you see it! More specifically, JHQ has a specific design language: a distinct way with a curve, a classically-rooted sense of proportion, and just a bit of whimsy. Each object is charismatic and elegant, but doesn't take itself too seriously.

Do you dare to use any of your pepper mills in the kitchen?

As an homage to the first [JHQ] mill we ever encountered, we use his Vanguard mill in our kitchen.

quistgaardpepper.com
@quistgaard_pepper

The Delicate Art of Apartment Community

WORDS + IMAGE ERYCA GREEN

I confess, I'm not a group person. I don't do group activities, and I'll always choose one-on-one over a crowd. But I've never underestimated the importance of community. Communities, quite literally, save lives. Over the years, I've belonged to a few.

As a teenager, it was the punk community – music, mohawks, safety pins, sullenness and solidarity. When my kids were young, it was the school community – fetes, lunchboxes, playgroups and the inevitable, occasional judgment from other parents. Then came the sporting years, which stole almost every weekend of my thirties. (I have two sons and have attended more cricket and soccer matches than is strictly legal or even remotely enjoyable. Frankly I wouldn't even know how well they played – it all looked the same to me.) At one point, I was part of a community farm, where we stirred biodynamic composts and cooked lunches with produce we'd nurtured like high-maintenance toddlers. Without going into detail, let's just say that won't be happening again. It was a bit too much community for me.

Then there's the cancer community – one I joined reluctantly. May you never need it, but know that if you do, it's there: fiercely supportive, impossibly kind, and full to the brim of stories that could melt your heart.

Now I'm in a very different kind of community – the apartment building kind. It's the one I found most difficult to crack, but oddly, the one I've come to treasure most. Our building is over 20 years old, with more than 300 apartments and hundreds of wildly diverse occupants.

It's a cultural melting pot, which is wonderful in theory – but in practice, it makes for an oddly delicate dance when it comes to connection. Some want privacy, some want communal barbecues. Some just want everyone to be quiet.

Apartment living wasn't something I ever imagined for myself. It can feel lonely – a strange kind of proximity without connection. I can go days without seeing anyone on my floor, and yet hear snippets of their lives through the walls (I have come to terms with the eight-year-old drummer next door, who practices every day without fail, but who, it must be said, is really very talented). We are all respectful of each other's space, but it's bizarre how physically close we are while still living separate parallel lives.

And yet – community finds a way.

Every morning at 7am I hear the tinny sounds of 'meditation' music coming through the speaker of a phone. Sometimes a voice is raised in an incredibly out-of-tune, out-of-time bout of improv singing. Some time ago, on the third morning of being awoken by this intrusion after a bit of a rough night, I flung myself out of bed, marched to my balcony and leaned over to see who was cutting up the early-morning peace in this painful way. Below me was a woman of indeterminate age doing Tai Chi. Despite my crankiness, I could not help but be impressed at her remarkable dexterity. I still wanted the noise to stop though, and as I drew breath to shout down at her, she looked up and smiled the most beatific smile at me, and gave a little wave ... all my crossness melted away and I waved back. Now I just smile every morning when I hear her. Even though we have never actually connected other than that one moment, I feel actual love for her.

There are eight units on my floor – five owner-occupied, three rented. There are people on this floor I have never laid eyes on. But you know who gets you talking? Pets and children. I have neither living with me, but I love both, and it was through patting a shy greyhound and an excitable pug in the courtyard that I first began to feel connected.

My favourite neighbours have both – a dog and two kids. We lead completely different lives, rarely cross paths outside the lift, and yet we're quietly intertwined. They have a key to my apartment for when I (regularly) lock myself out. Their place doesn't have a bath, so when I'm away or out for the evening, I text to say "the bath is free" so they can wander down the hall with a towel and soak in some peace. This quiet reciprocity – no obligations, just gentle support – is the essence of community for me.

I have become a part of a Monday night movie group. I stop for long-winded debates in the courtyard about whether it's a garden or a playground.

> *I navigate awkward moments in the lift when someone clearly wants to chat and someone else just wants to check their mail in silence. These are the moments – warm, odd, occasionally annoying – that make up the patchwork of a shared life.*

Because, in the end, community isn't necessarily about organised activities or shared interests. It's about humanity. For me, it's about knowing, on some primal level, that while I may live alone, I'm not truly alone. I am a part of something – a complex, unpredictable, occasionally noisy, often beautiful, something.

THE BEGUILING BANKSIA CHAIR

It’s hard to decide what’s more charming and alluring about the Banksia Chair: its friendly chunky-curvy form or the clever reimagining of its source material. For me, the seed pods of the native Australian Banksia tree conjure images of ‘The Big Bad Banksia Men’: the rather haunting gang of anthropomorphised Banksia seed pods Australian children’s author May Gibbs cast as the villains in her popular Gumnut series. But for Perth-based designer and maker Mark Lilly, these pods - intriguingly intricate and dense - were an underutilised material begging for experimentation.

INTERVIEW ELIZABETH PRICE

(Left)

Designer Mark Lilly sat on the Banksia Chair, pictured with his dog Jasper. Image: Natasha Adamson.

(Right)

The knobbly and pitted pods have been tamed and smoothed into the chunky-curvy form that is The Banksia Chair. Image: Mark Lilly.

How did you come to designing and making furniture and other things?

It all began about 15 years ago, when I was living in London and frequently moving between rental homes. Out of necessity, I started building any furniture we'd need from scrap timber I could find within walking distance of each new place. Since I didn't have transport, I'd leave the pieces behind when I moved and start fresh at the next location - each time trying to improve on the last. Then over time I began collecting tools, sourcing better timber, refining ideas and learning the hard way!

What was it that drew you to working with wood?

When you first get into woodworking and furniture design, it can feel a bit rigid - like there's a 'right' way to do every technique. But as you gain experience and develop your own perspective, you start to see that there aren't really any rules - you can create whatever you want, however you want - and that endless possibility means there are still some very innovative ideas that haven't been done yet.

The Banksia pods in their raw form. Image: Mark Lilly.

Tell us about your "craft-centric" approach and the role experimentation plays in your process.

I'd say I'm a designer before I'm a maker, but rather than an 'industrial' design approach, I think of what I do as 'crafted' design. That means the pieces I create can still be made by hand - with care and attention to detail, but the focus remains on clean, contemporary, minimal forms - without making the handcrafted aspect the centrepiece (if that makes sense).

Much of my design process is driven by hands-on experimentation in the workshop, where I'm surrounded by material samples and odd-shaped offcuts. I love pairing random shapes or materials together and playing with 'what-if-I-did-this-to-this' questions to see where my aesthetic sensibilities lie. I love when something just clicks and you're like: this works somehow but I have no idea why or what for. My phone is full of photos of things like this and if ever I'm stuck for an idea I'll just scroll through them and then my mind's off again!

Tell us about the origins of the Banksia Chair, perhaps starting with the impetus for exploring that specific material...

It was a bit of an odd one really, I was at a makers market and saw someone selling turned Banksia pieces - tea light holders and small bud vases, the kind of things you see quite a lot of in Western Australia. I remember thinking to myself, surely there's something new that can be done with this material - maybe sticking two together end to end might warrant some other use. I drew a couple of sketches of what I thought could be done with them in a sketchbook and then I forgot about it. Two years later I found the sketches and got to sourcing some Banksias to have a play with.

The Banksia Chair in the making. Image: Mark Lilly.

What did you learn while experimenting with the seed pods and its contrast to working with timber?

I learnt that the seed pods had a lot of great qualities that lent itself to my idea of joining them together which I was very pleased about. For instance, although they look super porous with all the holes, there's actually a very dense solid core of about 25mm which is ideal for a bit of joinery to fix them together. They also don't have a grain direction like standard timber, and are just a mass of timber-like fibres, so there isn't any warping over time which also makes for strong joints.

What inspired the beautiful form of the chair?

The chair was made for an exhibition I put on for Fremantle Design Week and I had initially drawn up something a bit more conservative with just straight lines, more akin to a Windsor chair. As I was making it I realised that if I cut a 45 degree mitre in one of the dowels then I could make a rounded corner, and then a chaotic mid-project redesign ensued. I had built the frame expecting I'd need to add extra supports, but it turned out to be incredibly strong and stable as it was. People assume that the chair is fragile and weak, but it weighs more than 10 kilograms! I've jumped up and down on it and tipwped back on the legs and it's solid as a rock.

Are there any plans to expand into a collection? I feel like I can see its sibling coffee or side table in my mind so clearly...

You're right, the material lends itself to pretty much every archetype going. I've got a sketchbook full of ideas waiting to be materialised so definitely more in the pipeline.

@mannerfurniture

An invitation to play

TALKING MAKE BELIEVE WITH ICELANDIC DESIGN COLLECTIVE ÞYKJÓ

INTERVIEW KATE KOLBERG

“What makes this practice design rather than art?” is the question lingering in the air as Sigríður Sunna Reynisdóttir and I wrap up our conversation about her Iceland-based design collective ÞYKJÓ (pronounced thickyo). Sigríður, who goes by Sigga Sunna, pauses before offering: “Sometimes design is thought of as frivolous or highbrow, but at the end of the day, it’s about how environments are shaped – and this is what we are constantly reminding ourselves of: the way you design playgrounds can be crucial to how play is accounted for in everyday life.” Play, and accounting for it, is at the centre of ÞYKJÓ’s practice.

Founded in 2019, the collective describes itself as a design project for children and their families. Its five members – including Sigga Sunna, Ninna Þórarinsdóttir, Erla Ólafsdóttir, Sigurbjörg Stefánsdóttir, and Embla Vigfúsdóttir – plus a host of other ad-hoc collaborators, build interactive installations, collections and workshops that empower children and advance their right to play, freely. Based out of a coworking-style creative studio on the floors above Reykjavík Art Museum, ÞYKJÓ upends certain traditional notions about design to make good on the promise embedded in their name, which is, and not by coincidence, the Icelandic noun for “make believe.”

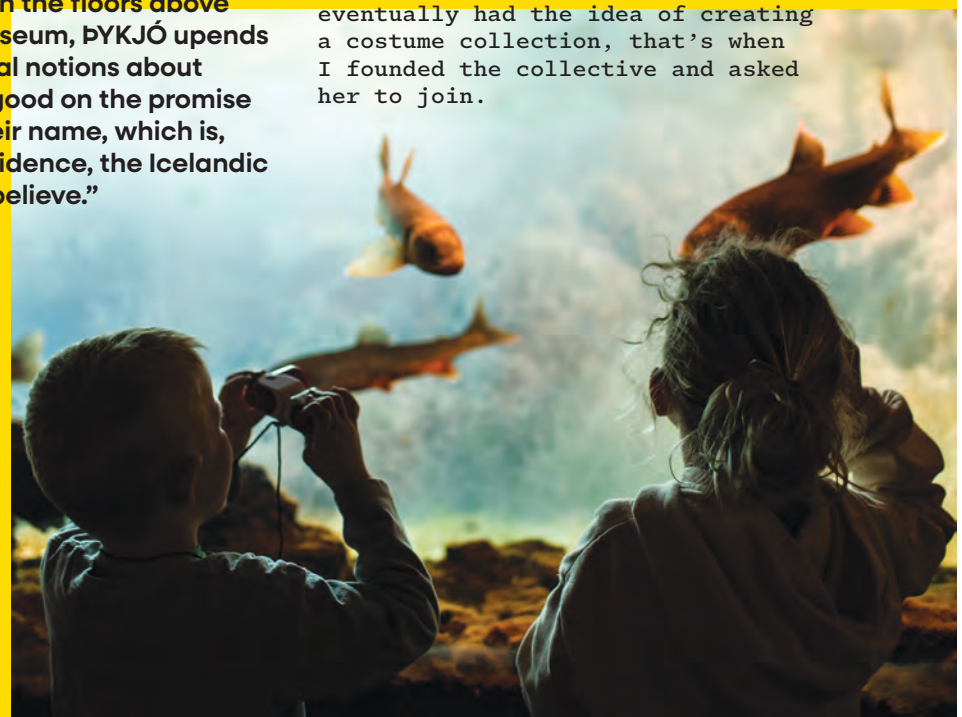
We spoke with artistic director Sigga Sunna, about the collective, its “Kids Consulting Panel” (Krakkaráð ÞYKJÓ), and how making environments more fruitful for children begins with really listening to them.

. . .

What sparked ÞYKJÓ – how did it begin?

ÞYKJÓ was sparked by what is sometimes called the three Ws: watch, wait and wonder. It was during a time when I, as a parent, would witness my baby twins engaging in moments of free play, and I observed how they used costume and textile elements from my theatre set designs in their make believe games. I was really intrigued by seeing what was fruitful and multi-functional and what was not.

From there, I began reading a lot about the theory on free play and reflecting on my own childhood, and I had a realisation that I’d taken some of my own freedoms and Scandinavian’s treasured history of children’s design for granted. Around the same time, I met Ninna, a children’s culture designer. I had never heard of such a profession and was just so inspired by her – even just as a person. So when I eventually had the idea of creating a costume collection, that’s when I founded the collective and asked her to join.



(Right)
Collaboration is a key part of ÞYKJÓ's work and design. Both children themselves and experts from a range of fields are consulted during each project's design process. Image: Sigga Ella.

And how did the others come to join?

It’s been very organic, with members joining depending on what we need, for example: architecture, tailoring or game design. My background is in puppetry and scenography, and with puppetry you’re always listening to the material to see what it wants to ‘say’. Sometimes I think ÞYKJÓ is the same, it’s almost like a living creature that surprises us as it takes us to new places.

Why did you choose to focus your efforts on free play specifically?

Honestly, I was just surprised by how little there was out there when I started looking for costume design or free play elements. We are in an era now where a lot of pedagogues are advocating for free play to be added to the UN Heritage List as something that is endangered because kids schedules are so packed and, well, screens have become tough competition.

I agree with the statement that you can judge a society on how they support families and nurture children and youth, as it is where the beating heart of each civilisation should be. And I felt there was such a lack of ambition – and even respect – for how children are sensory beings, so I said “okay, let’s try making it ourselves.”

Before we get into the projects, I wanted to touch on Krakkaráð ÞYKJÓ – your “Kids Consulting Panel.” Tell me a bit more about how this works and influences your design.

Krakkráð ÞYKJÓ is a tool, or platform, created in response to Articles 12 and 13 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which is a pillar upon which all our work is based. These Articles essentially convey a child’s rights to having their voices heard by grown-ups, stating that adults should not only Listen – with a capital L! – to children’s opinions but also create platforms for children to *share* their opinions.

(Above)
ÞYKJÓ's interdiscplinary design team from left to right: (above) Sigríður Sunna Reynisdóttir- Scenography Designer and Artistic Director, Embla Vigfúsdóttir- Game Designer and Product Designer. (below) Ninna Þórarinsdóttir- Children's Culture Designer, Sigurbjörg Stefánsdóttir- Fashion Designer and Bespoke Tailor, Erla Ólafsdóttir- Architect. Image: Studio Fræ.

Practically speaking, this means we always start a project with the kids involved, bringing them on as collaborators during the research and planning to see what interests them most. This is what we're striving to do - and as designers, need to do - to not assume the needs of who we're designing for or working for; but rather start a conversation. What is it that you need? What can we do for you? How can we be your tools?

Even though ÞYKJÓ means 'make believe' and is a term typically reserved for children, it struck me that it has so much relevance in the world of design, which is, essentially, structured around a similar type of play and imagination of possibilities. What do you think about these overlaps?

This is interesting because as designers we've really started being influenced by the kids we work with and how they play or make believe. We started moving away from our screens and began trying to honour ourselves in the same way we do kids. When we're starting a new project, I set up a rich buffet of materials and we try to go into it in a more tactile way. I can always see how it's so different than when we're beginning with, say, an online collaboration tool like a Miro board.

As designers, we tend to think so visually, but going in from a play perspective and how children navigate, we started becoming much more hands-on during the research process. It's a whole different experience to hold a bird's nest in your hand than it is to look at one online or in a book.

Let's talk about some of your projects. You mentioned your costume collection, Superheroes of the Earth ...

This was our first costume collection, and it's an ode to the wonders of the animal kingdom and our imaginations.

We tried to inspire children to explore a range of free play, adopting the diversity of the animals' traits – whether that be the 'introverted,' self-sufficient shell of a snail or the 'extroverted' colours and movements of a lovebird.

(Top left)
Drawing inspiration from actual birds nests, ÞYKJÓ's designers carefully studied a collection of nests at the Natural History Museum of Kópavogur, collaborating closely with the museum's resident biologists. Image: Sigga Ella.

(Above)
The collective's nest design is also inspired by Blindravinnustofa's woven basket design. The Icelandic organisation that works with visually impaired craftsmen specialising in weaving cribs and baskets for infants. Image: Sigga Ella.

(Left)
As well as their installation projects, ÞYKJÓ also run a range of workshops for children that invite children into a state of play and inspire them to be creative. Image: Almar Alfreðsson.

Designed as part of their Bird songs project, ÞYKJÓ designed a collection of nests each containing "textile eggs" programmed with bird sounds. Allowing children to enjoy nesting and the wonder of bird sounds. Image: Sigga Ella.

So then how do you go from costume to your furniture installation project Shellters? Such range!

The Shellters actually started when we were exhibiting *Superheroes of the Earth*. We had added a makeshift cosy corner to the space, basically like an invitation for parents to sit down with their kids. It was so special to watch the moments families shared there, so I started thinking this is what people really need: a space that facilitates quality time. There's something about being private in a public space that I think especially resonates with parents who are on parental leave. You don't want to be isolated at home, but you still may want a bit of a cocoon. The Shellters, which are these cosy shell-inspired cushioned nooks that can be placed wherever, provide just this.

Made from Valchromat, an innovative material derived from wood fibres and often brightly coloured, Shellters are an inviting space for parents and children to cocoon and bond in. Image: Sigga Ella.

The collective's first costume collection Superheroes of the Earth inspires children to engage with “make-believe” and imaginative play. Image: Sigga Ella.

There is already a tonne of interdisciplinary expertise on your team but you’re often collaborating with other specialists on these projects too. Why is that?

It comes from a place of curiosity. When we tap into curiosity, it’s when we’re most fruitful as designers, as this collective. I’ve really come to see how much easier it is than I thought to just knock on someone’s door and ask them: “do you want to come out and play?”

In our experience, similar to when I was a kid, most people want to. That said, you do need to find people you connect with on a human level. Like when we were working on Shellters, the biologists at Kópavogur Natural History Museum welcomed us into their massive collection of shells, or for another of our projects, Bird Song, they trusted us enough to take the birds nests to the basket weaver, who is visually impaired and needed to hold them to get a sense of how they felt.

Ultimately, it’s about finding someone who’s better than you at something and being curious to know what they know. And somehow building the bridge of how this information can be passed on to a child.

And then kids are of course collaborators too. What does that look like in real time?

Hljóðhimnar, a sound-based installation we created for Harpa Concert Hall is a great example of this. It was a very open-ended commission so we brought kids to the hall to help imagine how this empty space should be filled.

The immersive sound-based installation Hljóðhimnar is a play on the Icelandic word for the ear drum (Hljóðhimna), which literally translates to "sound worlds". Image: Sigga Ella.

Commissioned by the Harpa Concert Hall, Hljóðhimnar features sounds and music by the Icelandic Symphony Orchestra. Image: Sigga Ella.

Then we took their feedback and tried to sift through it both individually but also like a choir, to try and hear the song they're singing.

In the case of Hljóðhimnar (pronounced hl-yoh-th-heem-nar), it was so fascinating to witness how the children internalised the building. As adults, it's easy to see this concert hall as beautiful and historic, but as kids, they mostly noticed that it didn't feel cosy or soft. They all wanted to put carpets on the walls, for example. It's not something that I would have assumed to be such a loud wish from kids.

The exhibition itself follows the journey of a sound wave travelling through different parts of our ear. We noticed that during the workshops with the scientists, there were many details that all the kids loved. One good example of this was them learning about the small 'oval window' that forms part of our inner ear, which they were all fascinated by. So, we then decided to make our own little 'oval window' as a way of moving between two parts of the installation.

Do you think the projects and workshops run by ÞYKJÓ are inspiring children to learn how to design themselves, to approach the world in that way?

I hope so. I'd say it's most obvious in the workshops that we run, which are about children getting hands-on experience and opening windows into different design fields. We run workshops where, for example, they test things like designing in scale, but from a playful perspective. This is often already quite familiar to them from playing with toys like LEGO, but we show them that this is how designers think too if they're building a house - first you design it small.

Our goal is to create these moments and spaces where kids - and everyone - are invited to play. It's not about saying "get off your screens", but an invitation and offering something in return. I think as a society we need to do that more. Ultimately, we're just trying to plant these seeds and open up children's ideas of what is out there.

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