

THE FUTURE LOOKS Bright

With expansive approaches to architecture and design, the practitioners we profile in these pages are unleashing vibrant new aesthetics, reimagining our shared spaces for better inclusivity and forging new connections for collaboration
By Matthew Hague, Simon Lewsen, Eric Mutrie, Elizabeth Pagliacolo and Stefan Novakovic

NEW FORMS, NEW MEANINGS



ELENA SALMISTRARO imbues objects with significance

We spoke with the Milan-based designer and ambassador for Italian design, who has created expressive works for brands big and small, from Bosa and Busnelli to Cappellini and WonderGlass.

Elizabeth Pagliacolo: I first encountered your work when you created the exuberant *Axo in Fabula* for the Cappellini showroom in Milan. How did that collaboration come to be?

Elena Salmistraro: My first collaboration with Cappellini took place during the first Salone del Mobile after the COVID pandemic in a site-specific installation called *Amor Fati*, which represents the belief that destiny is in our hands — only we can shape it, convey it and improve it through our actions, choices and projects. After this success, we expanded our scope to craft a narrative, a fairy tale, called *Axo in Fabula*. The intention was to bring to life a rag doll similar to those once lovingly sewn by grandmothers for their grandchildren using whatever they could find at home. It was a simple yet meaningful gesture incorporating love, storytelling, re-use and a real lesson translated into play and passion: *Axo* was the denial of extinction and the affirmation of life itself, narrated through textile sculptures symbolizing the birth and evolution of this object and symbol. The fabrics came from various Cappellini collections, skillfully reassembled by members of the Cooperativa Alice.

How do you translate your creativity into products, by way of a process you describe as a “union between art and serial production”? And how do you work with producers to ensure that your vision is properly translated?

When I speak of the union between the world of art and serial production, it refers to my intention to introduce and convey a message that goes far beyond the simple primary function of mass-produced objects. I'm not interested in emptying the object to reach its essence; instead, I prefer to make it more complex, which doesn't mean complicating it but rather adding fundamental elements to imbue an object with meaning, narrative, soul, energy and culture. In general, the companies that contact me already know what to expect from my work and are eager to embark on a journey together. Sharing the same vision and perspective is fundamental: The most important aspect for me is the human aspect. I need to feel like part of a team, a family. If a good human relationship is established, the product will be the perfect expression of both my vision and that of the company.

You work with every material imaginable: textiles, porcelain, glass. Which is your favourite?

Working with different materials is a constant source of inspiration for me. It means delving into a new world, studying it thoroughly and understanding its nuances. The material I feel most comfortable with — the one that allows me the highest degree of creative expression — is ceramics. First in my hand-crafted work and then in my collection with Bosa, it opened the doors to the worlds of wood, glass, textiles and much more. Over the years, I've discovered the affinities between these materials, but also their infinite differences, especially in their processing techniques. For instance, cast glass requires a completely different approach from blown glass. In this context, I recognize the crucial importance of craftsmanship skills and first-hand knowledge from masters of the trade.

BELOW LEFT: Elena Salmistraro created *Legami* — a series of boldly graphic hand-tufted rugs — for Tai Ping.

BELOW MIDDLE: *Crisalide*, a porcelain handle for Dnd, features playful motifs.

BELOW RIGHT: Endlessly customizable, *Grumetto* is a soft-as-a-cloud sofa designed for Busnelli.



PORTRAIT BY SIMONE FALCETTA





ABOVE: Bowen Liu sits among two pieces from the cast-glass Helle collection, including the side table (also shown below) and the floor lamp, with its white oak base.

BELOW RIGHT: From the same series, this pair of bookends celebrates the way in which light hits coloured glass.

BOWEN LIU embraces glass

Like a large body of water during a moment of morning stillness, Bowen Liu's furniture is a lesson in tranquil beauty. As a sailor, Liu regularly competes in regattas as part of a team with her fellow Brooklyn designers. Now, she is riding the wave of another graceful yet temperamental pursuit: glassmaking. Back when Liu (who grew up in Beijing and Tangshan, China) was studying furniture design at the Rochester Institute of Technology, she focused her efforts on woodworking techniques — but she still managed to squeeze in a few classes on glass production. "I love the process and the final product," she says. "Molten glass, having the consistency of molasses, requires constant movement to work with."

Unveiled at WantedDesign Manhattan this past May, her Helle glass collection finally sees her sail toward transparency. Along the way, she also passes by the East River's Hell Gate Bridge. The NYC landmark, which caught Liu's attention while she was on her way to a regatta, initially inspired the Helle collection of wood furniture, released in 2021. "The way the light was hitting it drew my eye to the tapered bridge supports," she says.

Those forms, first appearing as blocky bases on a solid oak dining table and armoire, now show up in the latest series — a floor lamp, a mirror and a side table — in cast glass. Liu worked with a Brooklyn glass studio to build moulds that allow large tabletop and base components to be fired in a kiln. Many of these elements take more than a week to craft. The pieces favour hard lines, but the bubbles within them introduce an underlying sense of flow. "When I was younger and first saw glass with bubbles in it, I felt like I was looking at this stopped moment," says Liu. "It had a frozen time aspect to it that I thought was very romantic." **EM**



PHOTOS BY BOYANG HU (HELLE COLLECTION)



ABOVE: Futurestudio's eclectic interior design for Piano Piano on Colborne Street includes the cobalt-blue Carousel Bar with a merry-go-round horse.

RIGHT: Bellwoods Brewery strikes a more subdued note, as the studio seeks to bring out what is unique in each of the brands it works with.



PHOTOS BY NIKKI LEIGH MCKEAN AND DRAGANA PARAMENTIC (PIANO PIANO); BRITNEY TOWNSEND (BELLWOODS BREWERY)

FUTURESTUDIO captures the essence of its clients

Ali McQuaid's design firm might be called Futurestudio, but monochromatic, sterile surfaces and integrated tech interfaces don't figure prominently in her palette. If you've spent time in any of her warm, multi-layered Toronto interiors — from the Dear Grain bakery to Othership spa — you might, in fact, feel a twinge of nostalgia. Or you might have renewed hope for the future, one with a lot more feeling than expected.

"For most of our projects, our goal is to transport guests and give them a totally captivating experience for a few hours," McQuaid explains. "Soft lighting, smoked mirrors, plush fabrics: Attention to those design details makes people feel good in a space." One of her recent interiors, Piano Piano on Colborne Street, abounds with riotous colour and decor — think cobalt-blue millwork, fantasia fabric canopies and a merry-go-round horse (around the Carousel Bar, naturally). That doesn't mean that futuristic-style spaces are out of the question.

"I like to look at each project as if it were a movie and we are creating the set design," McQuaid says. "The set we would create for a sci-fi film is different from a period drama." Besides Lee Restaurant (a collaboration with chef Susur Lee's wife, Brenda Bent, and Karen Gable), her prolific list of new and on-the-way projects includes a couple major undertakings outside Toronto: two Othership locations in New York and a boutique gym concept in Dubai. "Every client is different, and when the project opens, I want the space to feel like them — not us." **EP**

WILL CHOUİ revives brutalism with a citrus twist

While completing his furniture design MFA at RISD back in 2020, Will Chouï found himself homesick for Montreal's notorious construction. So he channelled the city's traffic cones into one of his final first-year projects: a sofa made from metal rods painted bright orange. The design was a turning point. Before that, Chouï had been playing it safe with pieces that reflected his background designing case goods. "My teachers kept telling me, 'Okay — we've seen that you're a good fabricator. Show us your creative side,'" he says.

Since graduating, the designer (born in Quebec City and now based in Bolton-Est) has continued to take inspiration from the urban realm. He's particularly struck by the harsh beauty of brutalism. "I really connect with the values behind it — that idea of durable, solid, efficient construction," he says. "I wanted to honour the movement and keep it rolling with these 21st-century expressions." Elements of Joseland & Gilling's SMC Building in Sydney, Australia, informed the grid-like 1979 set that Chouï debuted at WantedDesign Manhattan this May. Fabricated as aluminum sheets that are then slotted together, the collection's side table, chandelier, table lamp and pair of mirrors nod to Chouï's early days creating custom furnishings with a CNC. "The transfer from 2D to 3D — taking a flat sheet and making a sculptural object with it — makes for a fun assembly," he says.

The collection also makes for a great showcase of the designer's signature hue, which he employed in his previous grouping of acrylic furniture, Fluo. In fact, the 1979 pendant is perhaps the most orange thing he's designed yet. "Because the light reflects off all the little squares, if you put it in a white room, the whole space becomes orange," he says. **EM**



ABOVE: Will Chouï's 1979 collection includes the Gros mirror, a statement piece with a base grid in powder-coated aluminum.

RIGHT: The desk lamp from the same collection comes in raw or powder-coated aluminum, with warm or cool LED options.



PHOTOS BY LUCHO CALDERON



ABOVE: Mycocrete is injected into BioKnit with an extrusion gun and takes the shape of the 3D-knitted textile mould.

LEFT: One of mycocrete and BioKnit's first applications, this pavilion at Newcastle University hints at the new biomaterial's sculptural possibilities.

JANE SCOTT and her team introduce a mycelium-based building material

The built environment produces 40 per cent of global greenhouse gas emissions. That is why a study published in *Frontiers in Bioengineering and Biotechnology* in July was especially thrilling: It shows the promising results of Newcastle University's experiment in making a new, stronger type of mycelium-based interior construction material for non-structural uses, as well as a 3D-knit formwork that, when combined with the novel material, makes it even more robust.

"Mycocrete is a new formulation of mycelium and substrate mix," explains Jane Scott, one of the study's authors (with Romy Kaiser, Ben Bridgens and Elise Elsacker) and the leader of the U.K. institution's Hub for Biotechnology in the Built Environment in the School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape. "It's designed as a smooth and viscous paste, rather than the more conventional mycelium spawn and wood chip or fibre mix." After testing the substance with various controls, the team took a stab

at a new type of formwork. Mycelium-based substances are typically grown in (and take the shape of) rectilinear moulds, limiting their use to blocks and panels. What if it were possible to devise a formwork that not only expanded the aesthetic possibilities of mycocrete but also did away with the waste of discarded moulds? The answer, the team found, was in a 3D-printed knit: Injected into the tubular textile with an extrusion gun, the mycocrete takes on never-before-seen forms with increased structural integrity. To wit: the organically contoured dome-like pavilion the team has placed on display at the university.

For Scott, the eco-material's inherent properties constitute just one positive aspect of "growing as construction," a new approach to making biologically based building elements, including the non-load-bearing structures (such as insulation, internal linings and novel surfacing) of future interiors that she sees as mycocrete's ideal use. "Growing as construction allows us to rethink a lot of the conventional construction processes; to produce locally on site, to reduce transportation associated with shipping individual parts for assembly and to develop sustainable practices." As they advance BioKnit, she and her team see opportunities to reduce a building's greenhouse gas emissions over its construction and life cycle by using this type of lower-carbon material with greater functionality, insulation and breathability — which could further reduce the operational carbon linked to heating and cooling. Of course, experimenting with form is important too. "We are also very interested to explore what an architecture of the future that has been grown rather than constructed might look like, and what it might feel like to live in a bio-fabricated building." **EP**



PHOTOS BY MATTHEW KALTENBORN (PORTRAIT); HUB FOR BIOTECHNOLOGY IN THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT (MYCOCRETE)

MARIA YABLONINA's robots will help buildings last longer

"I want to not build a single other building ever again." That is how Maria Yablonina, an assistant professor at the Daniels Faculty at the University of Toronto, describes the core emphasis of her paradigm-shifting work at the intersection of architecture and digital fabrication. Beginning with her PhD thesis at the University of Stuttgart, she has been engineering climbing robots that build spaces — changeable interiors and morphing installations — for many years now. But more recently, she has evolved her practice to focus on how robots can capture information that can be useful in renovating or preserving an existing building. "Can we imagine a scenario in which it's actually cheaper to re-use than it is to demolish? Because right now, it's always easier to demolish."

A case in point is a collaboration with Zahner, a manufacturer of highly crafted architectural metalwork for artists and architects, on a research project for possible application in the renovation of the SOM-designed Cadet Chapel at the United States Air Force Academy in Colorado. Yablonina has helped develop a ferromagnetic robot designed to clamp onto and climb up pipes, the building's core structure. "It's a little koala that almost hugs the pipe, and then it can go up and down and around it," she explains. Equipped with a sensor, it records its positions as it moves, all the while communicating with the total station on the construction site. The measurements it

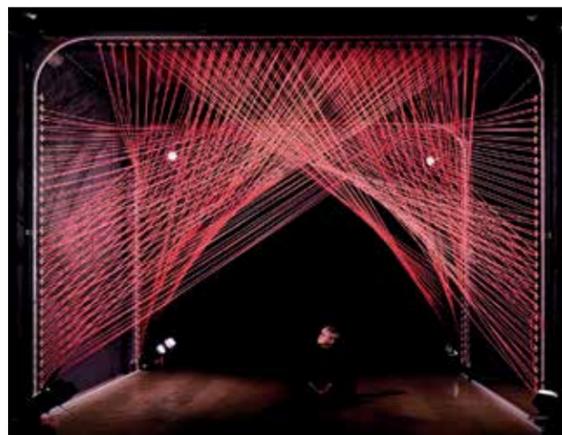


LEFT: Mounted in Milan in 2017, Yablonina's installation *POSTHUMAN: When Technology Embeds Society* featured one of her early weaving robots.

takes could inform the design files for a new facade system, which would require custom clamps that are friction-fixed onto the pipe. Since the facade is made of flat sheets, the clamps must be positioned precisely, an especially difficult task because of the clamp's angular orientation around the cylindrical pipe. The second iteration of the robot could feature a little Sharpie marker holder that marks all the positions in which the clamps need to be installed on its second trip up the facade. And then a human would go up and install the clamps.

While the project is still in case-study mode, it shows how Yablonina approaches the robot-human dynamic. "It was really important to us to integrate as smoothly as possible into existing workflows on construction sites," Yablonina explains. "For me and for my collaborators, it's really important to think about this: Yes, it is a robot, but at the same time we can call it a tool. And we can imagine that in the long-term future, it could be carried in a tool case, along with other construction worker tools. It ends up in the hands of that part of the labour force, rather than automating that part of the labour force."

This consideration for human labourers is part of the critical eye on technology (and its potential misuse in exacerbating the inequities of capitalism) that informs all facets of Yablonina's work, from her research and teaching to the art practice she runs with Mitchell Akiyama, a fellow assistant professor at Daniels. Together, they developed a technology that recognizes high-frequency sounds like those emitted by the Mosquito, a device typically used in malls to fend off teenagers, who are especially sensitive to its output. Integrated into a portable music player with headphones, their innovation picks up on those frequencies and transposes them into a musical composition. "For an adult, it acts as a detector of something that one cannot experience or see or hear — so it finds layers of technological inequity and makes them visible or hearable. On the flip side of that, in the more jokey way, for a teenager it becomes a muffler of the Mosquito device. It's a good example of how our practice operates. We make a lot of physical objects as jokes, but also as critiques of capitalism and politics." **EP**



BELOW: For a gallery in Ljubljana, her robots wove a structure that continuously changed throughout the duration of the exhibition.

PHOTOGRAPH BY RUI HU

SPATIAL REIMAGININGS



LEFT: A fairy tale sensibility emanates from Adam Nathaniel Furman's Scarabesque seat, with its pink fibreglass throne.

RIGHT: The designer poses in front of their *Abundance* at Paddington Station. It and their *Croydon Colonnade* (below) animate drab parts of their home base of London, U.K.



ADAM NATHANIEL FURMAN brings joy to the public

Adam Nathaniel Furman's growing portfolio — which includes furniture, interiors and public spaces — exudes joy with its effervescent palette and playful shapes. Scarabesque is a campy throne with a Barbie-pink fibreglass seat perched on swirling, lemon-yellow legs made from powder-coated steel. (Speaking of Barbie, Furman's Glowbules light fixture is featured in Greta Gerwig's blockbuster.) On a larger scale, *Abundance*, an accordion-like wall, greets commuters with a burst of rainbow hues as they travel through Paddington Station, the bustling but decidedly grey rail hub in Furman's hometown of London, England.

Beneath the brightness is a deeply personal narrative. Furman, who identifies as agender and uses they/them pronouns, says design is partly their "therapy" to overcome the traumas of growing up queer at an unaccepting point in Britain's history. Furman's childhood was marked by Section 28, a now-defunct Thatcher-era law that banned teachers from talking about homosexuality. "Section 28 was incredibly damaging," explains Furman. "I was asked not to attend school at one point because my teachers couldn't deal with the homophobic bullying I was experiencing. They simply couldn't talk about it."

For solace, Furman wandered London, sketching what they saw. "Buildings were my silent friends," they say. "Buildings don't bully you." Furman's love of urban forms led them to study at London's Architectural Association, where they later co-led a course on colour. Although Furman did not go on to qualify as an architect, their passion is still evident in installations such as the *Croydon Colonnade*, where they used a gradient of blue tiles to articulate the base of a 50-storey office tower. "I really like corporate architecture that manages to be artistic," they say. "There is something wonderful about squeezing elegance out of a tight commercial budget."

Furman uses both their design aesthetic and their rising influence to be an unapologetic voice for queer inclusion. When the Victoria & Albert Museum removed a poster that read "Some people are trans, get over it!" from its Young V&A wing, Furman called for a boycott and public protest. "Sadly, no one else joined me," they say. "People are just too afraid in this era where all non-right-wing protest is dismissed by being labelled 'cancel culture.'" In October 2023, Furman designed a space at London's Kew Gardens to house "Queer Nature," a show featuring video interviews with over a dozen horticulturists, scientists, authors, drag artists and activists, highlighting the relationship between the LGBTQ+ community and the great outdoors. For the exhibit, the walls were festooned with green fabric panels covered in William Morris-style flowers, recalling the wallpaper in the Paris hotel room where Oscar Wilde died in exile. "It's in the spirit of Victorian aesthetics, layered with flowers that have been symbolically important to the queer community — and in a deep green that recalls how that colour was a cipher for queerness and decadent interiors." **MH**



PHOTOS BY GARETH GARDNER (PORTRAIT AND CROYDON COLONNADE)

GERMANE BARNES gives (architecture) back

To say that the past couple of years have been good to Germane Barnes — fresh off his Rome Prize fellowship and Venice Biennale participation — is a tremendous understatement. Yet if we need to identify an *annus mirabilis*, it might be 2021, when he was included in MoMA's "Reconstructions" exhibition, contributed the *Block Party* installation to the Chicago Architecture Biennial and received both the Architectural League Prize and Harvard GSD's Wheelwright Prize.

An exhibition exploring "the relationship between architecture and the spaces of African American and African diaspora communities," "Reconstructions" definitively catapulted Barnes's career into the spotlight. By this point, he had already been prolific, beginning with his work in Opa-locka, a years-long project that had first brought the Chicago native to Miami (where he's been based for 10 years now) at the age of 27. At the time, the district was doubly distinguished: by its high crime rate and its unique Moorish revival architecture. As its designer-in-residence, Barnes led a multi-phase refurbishment that included transforming a roofing company's factory into an arts centre with a shared vegetable garden. Yet until MoMA came calling, this important work was flying under the radar. "I wasn't getting recognition because the budgets weren't high," says Barnes, "and the work was at a very basic level of necessity."

Around the same time as the MoMA exhibition, Design Miami and the Chicago Biennial took notice of Barnes, and he began to create the types of installations — architecture at the intersection of art infused with Black identity and socio-political commentary — that he's since become known for globally. It's also when he decided to apply for the Rome Prize with a proposal to research North African contributions to classical architecture and the provenance of porches in ancient civilizations — and won. During his subsequent fellowship at the American Academy in Rome, he found plenty of archeological evidence for his thesis and evolved it into the basis for *Griot*, the work he showed at the Venice Architecture Biennale. "I said, 'You know what? I'm going to design a brand new column model. Because if we already have this stuff that's stolen, I'm going to do my own column order that references this history and I'll break every rule that's within classical architecture — and design it based on identity and migration and labour.'"

His participation in marquee art and design world events (in November, the Museum of Art and Design Miami will present his gathering space, called *Ukhamba*, based on African woven-wood baskets) hasn't distracted him from locally rooted projects. As an associate professor at the University of Miami School of Architecture and the director of its Community, Housing & Identity Lab, he's been working in Palm Beach County neighbourhoods that have been historically disenfranchised and disinvested, like Delray Beach, where he's creating a Bahamian marketplace with a wonderfully faceted architectural awning.

"I would say my number one priority is to make my family proud," Barnes says of his ambition. "They have influenced me in many ways, from my style to the way that I design architecture; they don't realize how impactful they are. My second priority is to make nice spaces for people who have historically not had nice spaces. There are a lot of marginalized communities that have had spaces taken from them, either due to gentrification or urban renewal or just simply by a loss of finances, the result of wars and pandemics and recessions." **EP**



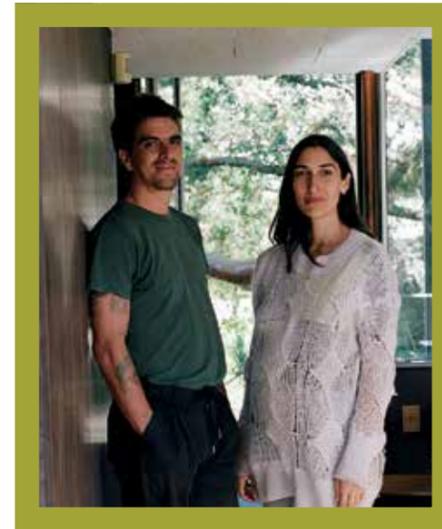
ABOVE: With *Rock Roll* for last year's Design Miami, Germane Barnes created an ode to Miami's Black communities and the city's carnival culture.



PHOTOS BY KRIS TAMBURELLO

RIGHT: In Lanza's *Pabellón Community Centre*, made of rammed earth partitions, a stone seems to float in mid-air.

BOTTOM: Lanza installed three bench-like circles made of stacked brick to enliven Spain's Logroño City Hall, designed by Rafael Moneo in 1973.



PHOTOS BY PIA RIVEROLA (PORTRAIT), ALBERTO ODÉRIZ (PABELLÓN); JOSEMA CUTILLAS (LOGROÑO)



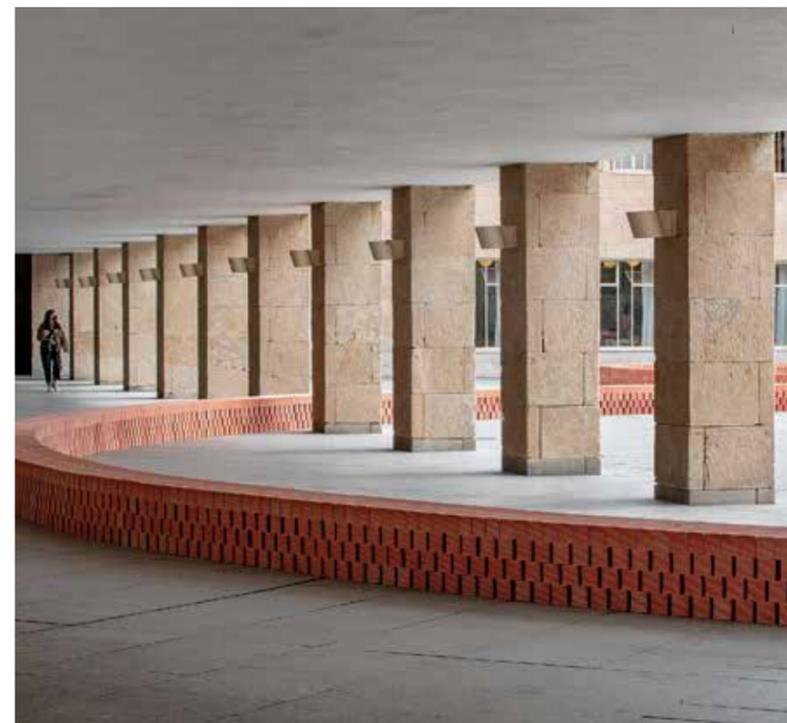
LANZA ATELIER creates places for the people to take over

Shortly after opening shop in 2015, Lanza — a Mexico City boutique founded by architects Isabel Abascal and Alessandro Arienzo — was commissioned to design a suite of bathrooms along a cycle path in Ecatepec de Morelos, just north of the city. Rather than mere pit stops, their bathrooms were public kiosks, with planters and shaded rest spaces. The local government failed to maintain the amenities. They've since been picked apart and blanketed in graffiti. As infrastructure, they're no longer functional, yet they still exert an aesthetic presence. "They're strongly vandalized," says Abascal, "but the architecture remains."

Abascal and Arienzo are fascinated by the life cycle of buildings — the way they morph over time into entities their creators never envisioned. For them, architecture is not about control but rather contingency and flux. "We try to make architecture thinking of what the second life of our projects might be," says Arienzo. For Design Week Mexico 2018, they built a temporary pavilion above a pond in a public park: a narrow corridor featuring a stone floating in mid-air, seemingly defying the laws of gravity. After dismantling the project, they sent the materials, mostly compressed earth blocks, to a town destroyed by the 2017 Puebla earthquake, to be reconstituted anew.

Some of their projects are original builds; others are interventions that give existing structures a second life. For *Concéntrico*, the annual design festival in Logroño, Spain, the duo adorned an angular Franco-era courtyard with three massive red-brick circles. That simple move — a soft flourish in a hard, fascistic space — completely changed the ambience. Citizens who'd always steered clear of the courtyard suddenly found themselves drawn toward it.

Lanza's early conceptual work has gotten it the kind of attention that leads to more traditional commissions: a fusion restaurant where, from a distance, the pink concrete panels resemble slabs of marble; a forest home made of golden brick with an adjacent yard demarcated by a curvilinear wall. "We envisioned wild nature inside the yard," Arienzo explains. The abandoned bathrooms in Ecatepec, meanwhile, are sitting among the lush foliage. "The beauty of the space itself remains," Arienzo says. **SL**



COMMUNITY DESIGN AGENCY retrofits the slum

Half a kilometre from the Sanjaynagar slum, an informal settlement in Ahmednagar, India, there's a housing project composed of grim brick-and-mortar mid-rises. The regional government invited Sanjaynagar residents to relocate to the nearby buildings for free, but most declined the offer. For architect Sandhya Naidu Janardhan, founder of the social-impact firm Community Design Agency, this decision is hardly surprising. Sanjaynagar, she explains, isn't just an agglomeration of shanties; it's a neighbourhood, a place where parents watch over each other's children, where people cook for one another, where Hindus coexist peacefully with Muslims, upper castes with Dalits. "Residents feel that it's important to stick together," she says.

Her Mumbai firm specializes in people-centric design. Recent projects include a co-working space for e-waste sorters, a safe place of business for sex workers and a suite of public amenities for a Mumbai housing project. The most ambitious undertaking is an in situ rebuild of Sanjaynagar. Before commencing the design, Janardhan spent nine months consulting with residents. The result: a planned community of eight mid-rises with ample public spaces, including wraparound balconies and internal courtyards.

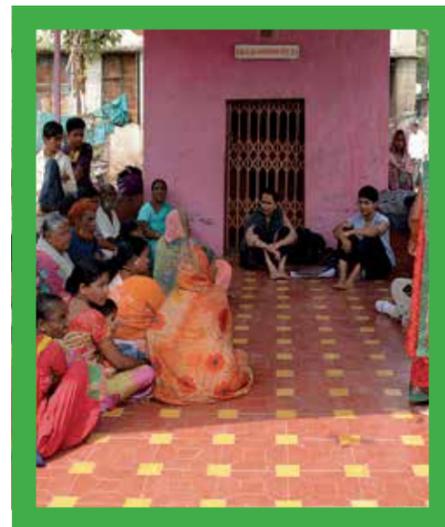
One building is already completed. The materials — fly ash bricks, steel railings, decorative and shade-producing bamboo — are hardy and elegant, and the engineering program, which includes pile foundations and load-bearing arches, guarantees that the structure will endure despite being sited on spongy terrain. Funding for all eight buildings will come from governments, donors and residents themselves. The amount won't be insignificant: While Janardhan believes in being thrifty, she doesn't believe in being cheap. "With low-cost design," she says, "you end up squeezing on the square footage and taking away the social infrastructure — the very thing that makes communities strong."

The best aspect of the project is the respect it conveys for Sanjaynagar itself. "We shouldn't look at this community as just a collection of families," says Janardhan, "but rather as a larger, cohesive unit." She sees the slum not as a problem to be solved but as a successful experiment in communal living — one that can be made even more successful. **SL**



ABOVE: Of the eight new buildings, one has been completed, its wraparound balconies and bamboo shades signalling a bright future for its residents.

ABOVE: Community Design Agency is transforming the slum of Sanjaynagar into a fully functional neighbourhood. The firm, which invested nine months into community engagement for the project, is led by Sandhya Naidu Janardhan (below, seated far right).



PHOTOS BY RAJESH YORA (SANJAYNAGAR); PORTRAIT BY COMMUNITY DESIGN AGENCY



BURR upcycles Madrid's industrial ruins

When a new client comes to Burr Studio, the architects go with them to scout locations. This work may seem like the purview of real estate agents, but Jorge "Jano" Sobejano, a partner at the Madrid firm (along with Elena Fuertes, Ramón Martínez and Álvaro Molins), insists that it's fundamentally architectural in nature. Client conversations don't focus on resale value (Burr designs are too idiosyncratic to be blue-chip investments anyway) but rather on the potential of an existing post-industrial building to be transformed into what Sobejano calls a "programmatic hybrid" using the firm's "strategic tool set." The question, then, becomes how — with a few ingenious tweaks — can a factory or warehouse be retrofitted into something it wasn't intended to be?

Each of Burr's adaptive re-use projects is an answer to this question. The team begins by refurbishing everything that needs a touch-up, from the plumbing to the trusswork to the plasters. Then it adds a few choice architectural interventions, which are both minimal (in the sense that there aren't many of them) and bold (in the sense that they're conspicuous and unique).

For Eulalia, a warehouse residence for a collector of art and objects, they built industrial sliding doors and stairs with twisty yellow banisters — architectural curios worthy of the owner's collection. For Blasón, a home for a writer, they bisected the main space of a former automotive workshop with a cement-block wall, creating both a living room and a gallery. And for NNO6, a family home in a former office, they suspended a bookshelf painted cobalt blue from a steel ceiling beam: The fixture almost touches the floor but not quite. "The shelf is a totem," says Sobejano. "It stands in the middle of the house, demarcating space and giving everything around it a sense of order."

The beauty of Burr's adaptive process is that it makes for a certain kind of architecture — expansive, prismatic, occasionally cathedral-esque — out of what's already been created. "Working in pre-existing structures gives you the chance to inhabit incredible spaces," Sobejano says, "which you would maybe never build nowadays." Burr's job is to honour and augment such buildings, allowing them to express their subtle beauty. "Our clients get to keep the high ceilings and the volumes of air," says Sobejano. "All of that is already there." **SL**



ABOVE: Madrid's Burr has transformed a concrete warehouse into Blasón, the home and studio of writer Juan Ramón Silva Ferrada.

LEFT: The vibrant Blasón project makes use of a strategic tool set that the firm has developed for all its imaginative adaptive re-use projects.



A DESIGN COMMUNITY
that emphasizes cross-studio collaboration



PHOTOS BY NATHAN CYPRIE (STUDIO PORTRAIT); DAVID PLUS (LAPTOP PORTRAIT)

Shane Laptiste and **Tura Cousins Wilson** have had a year for the books. Over the early months of 2023, the co-founders of Toronto’s Studio of Contemporary Architecture (SOCA) were lauded with the RAIC’s Emerging Architectural Practice Award, as well as the Canada Council’s Professional Prix de Rome, while also playing a prominent role in Canada’s thought-provoking entry to the Venice Biennale of Architecture. But when we floated the idea of a magazine profile, the young architects were quick to emphasize that their achievements are fundamentally a community endeavour.

It called for a wider-spanning conversation. A couple of months later, a group convened in *Azure*’s office with senior editor Stefan Novakovic. Laptiste and Cousins Wilson were joined by fellow multihyphenate designers **Farida Abu-Bakare** and **Reza Nik**, as well as urban planner **Cheryll Case** and — via FaceTime from Munich — visual artist and musician **Curtis Talwst Santiago**. As the conversation unfolded, the tally of vital connections quickly mounted, and the names of their frequent collaborators — from Tiffany Shaw to Tei Carpenter — kept coming. In a field where competition is fierce and authorship and acclaim are jealously guarded, the mutual passion for sharing credit and amplifying the power of community feels refreshing, even transgressive.

The openness to collaboration also reflects a distinctly vocal, civic-minded sensibility. From teaching and mentorship to public outreach and professional engagement — whether through local events or professional groups like Black Architects and Interior Designers Association (BAIDA) and the Architecture Lobby — the group also shares a commitment to creating a more inclusive and just design profession, opening doors for emerging practitioners from diverse and marginalized backgrounds. After all, success has many architects — not to mention artists, activists and planners.

A PLACE OF ABUNDANCE

TURA: Something that Shane and I have been talking about recently — which ties into collaboration — is operating from a place of abundance rather than scarcity. If you’re operating from scarcity, you hoard opportunities. Yet I think there is actually a lot of work out there, and especially if you’re expanding upon what might be seen as traditional work for an architect to be doing. Our work on Alexandra Park, for example, started as a critique published in *Azure*, and even though we didn’t do it for a client, it started a lot of conversations.

SOCA is also designing an exhibition at the Gardiner Museum [“Magdalene Odundo: A Dialogue with Objects” opened October 19]. And Reza’s doing art installations like *Nuit Blanche* — and work at The Bentway [the linear park under Toronto’s Gardiner Expressway] with Tei Carpenter. I think architects are generally pretty well trained to cross over into these adjacent disciplines. And there’s curatorial projects like Dr. Kenneth Montague’s new exhibition at MOCA [“Dancing in the Light,” on until February 4, 2024], which Farida curated.



REZA NIK is an architect, artist and educator working at the intersection of community and culture — and the founding director of SHEEEP, an experimental architecture studio based in Toronto. He is also an assistant professor at the University of Toronto's John H. Daniels Faculty of Architecture, Landscape and Design; and a founding member of the Architecture Lobby's Toronto chapter.



FARIDA ABU-BAKARE is director of global practice at WXY and a co-founder of BAIDA (Black Architects and Interior Designers Association) Canada. She is also a lecturer at the University of Toronto and has served as a critic at the Yale School of Architecture. Farida is also the co-curator and designer of "Dancing in the Light," a portrait exhibition drawn from Kenneth Montague's Wedge Collection.



SHANE LAPTISTE is a co-founder of the Studio of Contemporary Architecture (SOCA) and has served as an instructor at McGill University and Athabasca University. A licensed architect with over 15 years of experience, he has overseen a range of project types dedicated to community spaces, particularly non-profit organizations creating affordable housing and gathering places.



CHERYLL CASE is the founder and executive director of CP Planning, a non-profit practice dedicated to implementing a human rights approach to community planning. She has also served as a sessional professor at the University of Waterloo and was a co-editor of the book *House Divided: How the Missing Middle Will Solve Toronto's Affordability Crisis*.



CURTIS TALWST SANTIAGO works in multiple media to examine questions of memory, ancestry and diasporic imagination. The Edmonton-born, Germany-based artist and musician's works weave historical, familial and speculative narratives together to question colonial frameworks and celebrate forgotten forms of knowledge.



TURA COUSINS WILSON is a co-founder of the Studio of Contemporary Architecture (SOCA), an architecture and urban design studio dedicated to inclusive city-building and public beauty. Tura is also an avid drummer and a member of the Leslieville Residents' Association, where he undertakes many community projects.

CURTIS: Tura and I met through Dr. Kenneth Montague, too — he was actually our dentist. He's retired now and he's full-time in the art world. And then we really got to know each other through music. We'd sit together in a room and sonically just create, create, create. It's so nice to be at ease with someone to allow your creativity to just go; it's not something that can be forced or really orchestrated. It's all been a natural progression since then.

SHANE: Tura and Curtis had this long-standing connection, and then eventually the three of us all worked on a pavilion proposal for the Venice Biennale — which we'd love to revisit. The collaboration lends new perspectives and the knowledge of different art practices and cultural, artistic and design references, and just having all those ideas and bringing them together.

FARIDA: Art is also so much more fast-moving than architecture. It's able to be more temporal and to meet the moment. I think of the social movement of 2020, and redefining the African diaspora identity globally, and everyone pivoting and translating that into contemporary art. And contemporary African artists were transforming their work from 2D to 3D to pavilions and structural elements. Seeing Theaster Gates's work on the [2022] Serpentine Pavilion in London, for example — that's a role that's never been done by an artist. And seeing those lines get blurred allows us an opportunity to redefine what architecture is.

But creatively, Canadian architecture still feels restricted, because we're not allowing communities to define what our environments should look like. And I think if we reach out to more artists and collaborate with them more locally, it starts to become more forward-thinking and more exciting.

SHANE: It also means connecting — and collaborating — with communities and breaking out of the moulds of academic practice. We [SOCA] taught a studio last semester at McGill, working in a historically Black neighbourhood in Montreal. Until then, many of the students never had an opportunity to actually think about the role of an architect as someone who's listening to people — and then using those conversations to think through what spaces can be and how they can be supported.

CHERYLL: One of the greatest gifts that architects bring to us urban planners is visualizing what the future can look like. To conceptualize and imagine something is one thing, but to lay that down in a drawing or rendering is very empowering for communities.

Much of the work that I've been doing with SOCA — in Toronto's Little Jamaica, for example — and with Reza, as well as with other architects, is about allowing communities to see how what they're imagining can be made real. And design is an important tool to engage the community — and even the government — and say "This is what we want to do."

REZA: Something that always bothered me was the insularity of the architectural profession — a culture of making things for other architects to look at. People look for architects to praise other architects' work without regard for what the general public thinks, or the communities that you're building for. But I think there's growth happening, and I hope it's finally starting to change.

FARIDA: It's tough to break out of that. But even just trying to spend more time within your community and finding more time with family and the people you love and finding joy — that allows you to create so much more.

BREAKING BARRIERS

SHANE: You need privilege to make it in architecture. And it starts at school, because it's a career where you're not going to make a lot of money — and you need connections to actually start something. And there are all of these structures that basically ensure only people of significant means can thrive.

REZA: One of my students was telling me today, "I work every day." She's supporting herself with a job, and that takes her out of the equation of pulling all-nighters, and so she can't put the same number of hours into it.

FARIDA: It's this militarization of architecture. I remember that mentality of "You can't not be here." You need to be in the studio full-time and fully committed to this experience, which needs to take up all your time. That's what we were all taught.

PORTRAITS BY NATHAN CUPPIS, DAVID PLUS (SANTIAGO)

TURA: We had these T-shirts with the slogan "Sleep is for the weak." And one time I actually fell asleep at the band saw, making a model.

FARIDA: So we have to be committed to a little bit of activism, a little bit of academia, a little bit of art — and of course community. A big part of BAIDA is championing architects and designers of diverse backgrounds. My dream is having Ghanaian students and people from West Africa come and complete school in Canada — anyone who has their master's — and be able to pursue working here. But there are lots of additional hurdles for foreign-trained architects.

REZA: And then you look at the exploitation happening in architectural labour. Part of what we're trying to do with the Architecture Lobby is to figure out how to collectivize and unionize the profession, to help expand bargaining power for architectural workers. And the other aspect that I've been interested in is sharing the knowledge about starting your own practice, which is something I'm trying to do through my practice, SHEEEP. I don't think we all need to compete with each other; we have to be collaborative and transparent about the business of architecture too.

CHERYLL: As someone starting out with an independent practice [CP Planning], I'd say that in my experience, you have to punch way above your weight. Especially as a young Black woman, I had to exceed expectations in every single project that I received. And that was incredibly difficult. I'm glad that I was able to continue to push and I was very fortunate to have people in my corner who expressed support. But financial validation didn't come until about six years into the whole process.

TURA: Once you start a practice, there's definitely a lot of barriers. There's this whole crisis in architectural procurement and how to make room for the smaller fish. And then as we're having all of these conversations about missing-middle housing, I think there's also a missing middle of clients in North America. So you get really amazing architects that get stuck at the private residential scale, which is the type of work that's least able to address social issues. You're basically doing kitchen renovations, or if you're really lucky, a home addition. And then there are the big projects like apartment towers, institutional buildings — which are very difficult to break into — with not much in between.

REZA: Something like The Bentway is an interesting model. They're willing to experiment with ideas. And it's like, "Hey, here's a two-year prototype. Let's see how it goes." I first applied to do an installation in 2020 and put together a proposal really quickly. The second time, I partnered with Tiffany Shaw and SOCA and we actually got shortlisted.

And then Tei Carpenter from New York's Agency—Agency got approached to submit a proposal, and she reached out to me to partner. [Carpenter and Nik's *Staging Grounds* installation opened in September and will be on display until 2025.] I think we need more organizations like that, which introduce architects to the public realm and the city bureaucracy.

CHERYLL: The public sector has a responsibility to create these types of opportunities and to support the creativity of those who've been traditionally excluded. The Bentway is a great example, but it can start small. In Little Jamaica, for example, they have a farmers' market every Sunday in the summer. And I think that's another critical way that the city has been able to support groups and create cultural opportunities, and it creates economic opportunities as well.

TURA: Seeing these kinds of changes also opens you up to the amount of possibility here in Toronto. I don't know if Toronto will necessarily ever be an architecturally beautiful place — it's kind of a cheap city, to a large degree, and there are a lot of problems — but there's a special energy here. Whether it's what's happening in Little Jamaica, or even new community land trusts in Kensington Market, there's a very grassroots, entrepreneurial spirit. Reza, you started your own thing. Cheryll, you just graduated from school and started doing it.

CHERYLL: I only started my own company because I couldn't get a job! Nobody would hire me. And if they hired me, they wouldn't give me anything to do. But you know what? It's the greatest thing that ever happened to me. **AZ**