

Interior view of
Agents of Change's
Spa School,
London, 2011.
Photo David
Grandorge.

WHERE ARCHITECTURE MEETS THE PEOPLE

Three firms challenge the traditional top-down procedures for architecture and urban design, actively engaging host communities from beginning to end.

by Mimi Zeiger

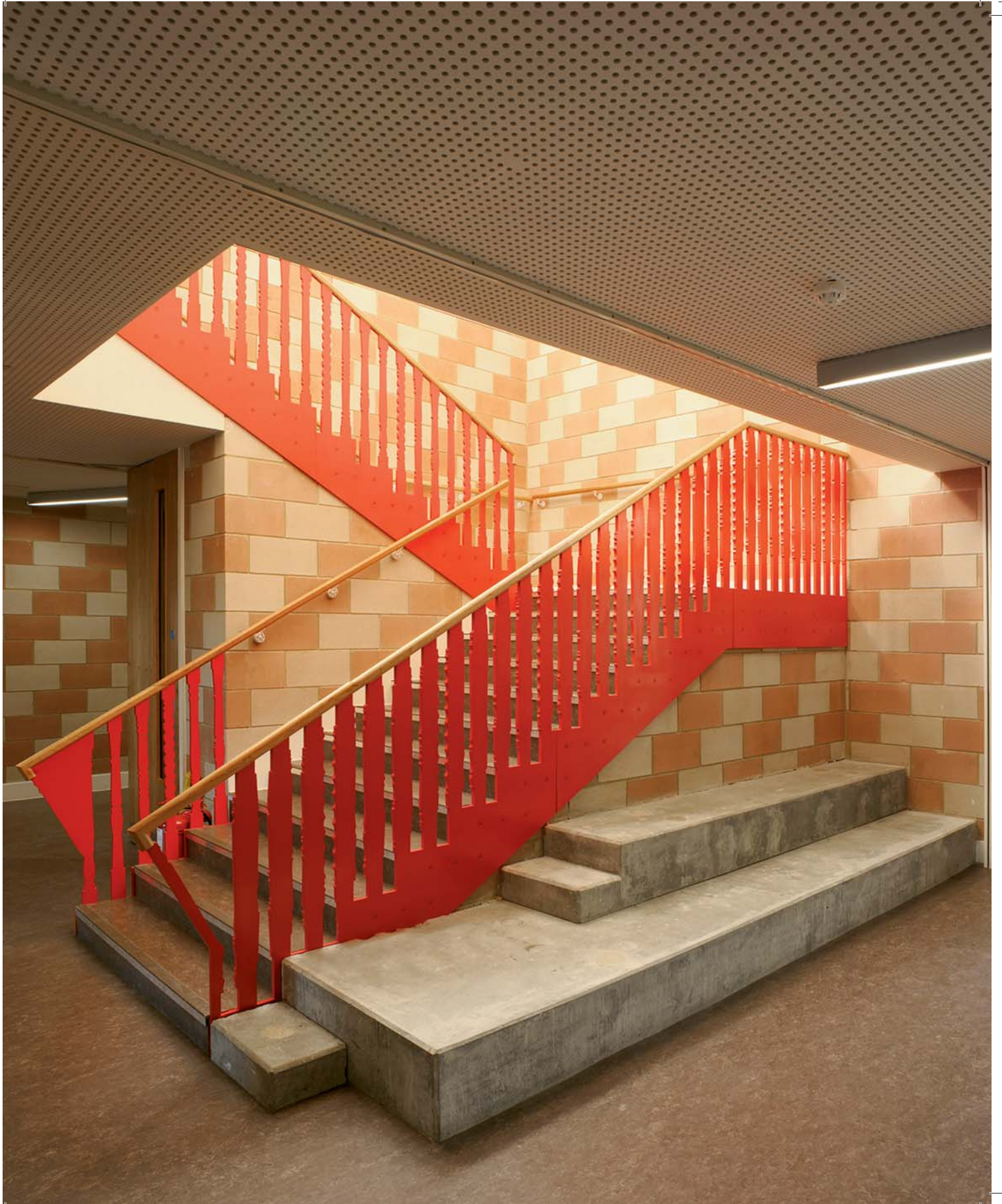
MIMI ZEIGER
is an architecture
critic based in
Los Angeles. See
Contributors page.

YOU CAN HEAR the “bwak, bwak” of chickens as dusk falls on Camino Verde, an informal settlement that sprawls over the hillside of south Tijuana. Down the slope, a group of men tinker with busted trucks. The neighborhood is home to 40,000 people. In a city that has become a hub of art and food culture in Mexico, Camino Verde is largely immune to any revitalization and is still plagued by poverty, crime and drug use. I’m standing on the site of Transborder FarmLab, created by Torolab, an interdisciplinary art collective based in Tijuana. Among the discarded tires, piles of trash and loose dogs, people here are trying to make a life for themselves. The FarmLab lot used to be narco-gang turf. Now, it is home to a bunkerlike cultural facility and terraced soil awaiting plantings.

To call this concrete structure with high windows and rolling metal doors a community center is to miss the breadth and ambition of Torolab’s goals. They want nothing less than to combat poverty through knowledge-

sharing—to use education, arts and culture to transform the lives of Camino Verde residents. FarmLab is an incubator, receiving funding from the Mexican governmental agency SEDESOL (Secretariat of Social Development). Inside its tough exterior there are classrooms for job-skills development and the fittings for an industrial kitchen and a computer lab. The electronics company Plantronics is currently conducting its job training at FarmLab, and Tijuana’s Culinary Art School will use the kitchen for classes.

Architect Raúl Cárdenas Osuna founded Torolab in 1995, and while the group began by proposing buildings, today the collective encompasses artists, graphic designers and community organizers who develop ideas and forge partnerships. “We are not about design but about program,” Cárdenas Osuna says, emphasizing that the function of a project and whom it serves is more important than its appearance. “We use social worker strategies to foster creativity that builds economies.”¹



Architecture as Social Practice

Poised at the intersection of art, architecture and urban policy, Torolab is one of a number of socially conscious architecture practices connecting with communities in new ways. Social concerns have always been inseparable from architecture. The professional act of making buildings requires acknowledging a societal component: a client, a user, a public. The challenge of addressing social issues such as poverty, crime and segregation through architecture came to the fore in the middle of the last century, when schemes developed under the auspices of urban renewal began to fail (such as the infamous Pruitt-Igoe housing project in St. Louis). Architecture, guided by the utopian visions of modernism, reproduced new versions of the unjust conditions it was trying to fix. By the 1960s, architects including Alison and Peter Smithson and Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown found themselves questioning anew just how to design in service of the public good.

Today, this concern is on the minds of many designers, and architectural approaches vary. Nonprofit organizations such as Architecture for Humanity and Public Architecture are advocates for design-led solutions that directly address social justice issues and natural or political crises. And the

past several years have seen exhibitions on the topic—for example, “Design for the Other 90%,” which opened at New York’s Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum in 2007, and the 2010 “Small Scale, Big Change: New Architectures of Social Engagement,” at New York’s Museum of Modern Art, which presented objects and structures focused on underserved communities across the globe. The shows deserve credit for shining a light on altruistically minded projects, such as the METI-Handmade School (2004-06) in Rudrapur, Bangladesh, by Anna Heringer and Eike Roswag, or Elemental’s Quinta Monroy Housing (2003-05) in Iquique, Chile. In both cases the people using the buildings participated in the construction. But criticism of these practices warned of a missionary “parachute-in” approach where Western values overlie local needs. On the magazine *Fast Company*’s design blog, a 2010 post by columnist Bruce Nussbaum pointedly asked: “Is the new humanitarian design coming out of the U.S. and Europe being perceived through post-colonial eyes as colonialism? Are the American and European designers presuming too much in their attempt to do good?”

By contrast, Torolab embeds itself in Camino Verde. Ana Martínez Ortega, a trained architect and Torolab member, has been working on the FarmLab project for three years. Over that time she has built relationships with many of the single mothers in the impoverished neigh-

Torolab’s FarmLab building under construction in Tijuana, Mexico, 2012. Photo Ana Martínez Ortega.





Workers planting trees on Torolab's FarmLab site, 2014. Photo Ana Martínez Ortega.

borhood, including Alma, a resident who now works for FarmLab. “This is so different from what used to be here,” said Alma, via translation by Martínez Ortega, when I asked her how FarmLab had affected her daily life. “We used to work to send our kids to school. We would go to work and come home and work. Now we have a chance to learn new things.” Here, change is not predicated on any single design object or piece of flashy architecture, but on disrupting and redesigning the economic processes that once seemed intractable.

Torolab practices what San Diego-based architect and urbanist Teddy Cruz calls “radical proximity,” a concept that rejects avant-garde autonomy and corresponding institutional mores. Instead it demands institutional transformation and new aesthetic categories that are equipped to take on activist practices, which includes social, political and formal relationships. Cárdenas Osuna grew up in Mazatlán, where his father was an architectural illustrator. Torolab's early work is marked by the graphic sensibility and rendering techniques passed from the elder draftsman to the budding architect. The collective's presentations mix line drawings, video and photographs, and often feature bold text and silhouettes in bright reds, yellows and greens that reference political posters.

Cárdenas Osuna is critical of his past work when he reflects on a 2005 project titled *9 Families*, shown at Storefront for Art and Architecture in New York and at LAXART in Los Angeles. Begun as a single house for a maquiladora (factory) worker, it developed into a larger scheme for multiple families. Torolab presented a master plan for the Tijuana site, designs for housing units and investigations into unconventional building materials such as repurposed tires, shipping pallets and used garage doors. The installation featured wall graphics and video interviews with the families. But for Cárdenas Osuna, it didn't go far enough in creating relationships with the community. “Design was not answering the question,” he

explained. “Our previous way of working was symbolic, but we are moving toward the pragmatic.”

Indeed, these days the collective's output has more in common with artists practicing in the realm of social sculpture, such as Theaster Gates or Edgar Arceneaux, than with starchitects issuing grand master plans around the globe. Gates's Dorchester Projects—a cluster of formerly abandoned buildings on Chicago's South Side that have been rehabilitated into kitchens, libraries and archives—places the artist in a role close to community organizer. Arceneaux is the founding director of the Watts House Project in Los Angeles. The artist-driven neighborhood redevelopment organization is powered by the efforts of local residents, artists, architects and designers. For Cárdenas Osuna, this is *gestión*, a Spanish term that speaks to the process of making something new. “We need to go beyond art or academic practice,” says Cárdenas Osuna. “Aesthetic value resides in other stuff: intellectual curiosity combined with emotion. FarmLab has an aesthetic of knowledge.”

Redefining Community

If Torolab's goal is to push beyond the aesthetics and established protocols of community engagement, Andrés Jaque Architects and the Office for Political Innovation, which he founded in 2003, are redefining what “community” means in a society that is increasingly urbanized and networked. The Madrid-based architect also teaches at Columbia and Princeton universities. The Office for Political Innovation creates work that not only questions what architecture is—a design might take the shape of an installation based on interviews with ordinary people—but also how architecture reflects or reframes the capitalized environment we live within.

Jaque gained visibility in 2009 with the House in Never Never Land, a multihued vacation home on the island of Ibiza. Constructed out of simple materials, including steel, corrugated metal, glass and rubber, and painted in light blue and acid green, the hillside retreat simultaneously references the mid-century modern designs of Palm Springs architect Albert Frey and the swimming pool paintings of David Hockney. Similarly, the Diocesan Clergy House (2004), a transformation of an abandoned seminary in the town of Plasencia, Spain, into a residence for retired nuns and priests, bespeaks the architect's love of bright slashes of color and off-the-shelf materials, which clash cheekily with the 15th- and 19th-century sections of the existing building. Both projects brought more clients to the office, but the new commissions were conventional and didn't foster the kind of social research the Office for Political Innovation was looking to explore. The retirement home in Plasencia, for instance, responded to the generational condition of an aging clerical population in Europe. The office's interventions are not simply formal gestures; based on observed social relationships and points of shared use, they are meant to foster participation in community life within the clergy

Andrés Jaque/Office
for Political
Innovation's
Diocesan Clergy
House, Plasencia,
Spain, 2004.
Photo Miguel de
Guzmán.





View of Andrés Jaque/Office for Political Innovation's performance *IKEA Disobedients*, 2012. Courtesy MoMA PS1. Photo Enrique Ventosa.



Andrés Jaque/
Office for Political
Innovation's
Escaravox
pavilions,
Madrid, 2012.
Photo Miguel de
Guzmán.

house: bright green paint serves as a guide throughout the building, and mobile seating, plantings and accent lighting make the courtyard spaces inviting.

“What’s the point of doing something that is not really answering the complex questions we want to work with?” asks Jaque. “Once we were called to do the elevators of already designed buildings. Is that the best investment we can make of our time? We’d rather be connecting to other people, having interesting discussions and getting responses that challenge us. It was from that moment that I started to work more intensively with sociologists and people from the political sciences, and that was exciting.”²

Jaque and the Office for Political Innovation’s *IKEA Disobedients* (2012) was the first piece of “performance architecture” to be acquired by MoMA. The work, consisting of video, photographs, a performance set and protocol for future performances, contrasts the homogenized portrait of young, healthy, family life painted by an IKEA catalogue with the complicated reality of actual existence. Jaque and team spent four months researching the lives of select residents in a Queens neighborhood, taking photographs of their spaces and activities. The focus was often on moments when domestic and public life overlapped: a mother with an in-home hair salon, an aquaponics researcher who rents out his apartment for public events, a couple who collect gay-themed books for the bookstore they hope to open. In a

performance at MoMA PS1, the neighbors reenacted their daily routines on a large set built out of wood framing and repurposed IKEA furniture. *IKEA Disobedients* celebrates people whose lives politicize the notion of home. “The combination of tiny, tiny alternatives put together can produce a difference,” explains Jaque, considering participants as actors within a networked system, each with the ability to assert individual agency. “They do not win the battle but produce occlusion within the system. We’re not saying that we’re going to be able to disconnect from IKEA or many other things like IKEA, but we really want to gain space within that context.”

In his efforts to present alternative choices within existing culture, Jaque mixes the technological with the physical and the conceptual in his designs. During the summer of 2012, the office installed *Escaravox lux* and *Escaravox sonum*, two mobile structures created for the courtyard of Matadero Madrid, a contemporary arts center. A former slaughterhouse in the Spanish capital’s Arganzuela district, the center is a multifunctional public space hosting live music, performances, movie screenings and parties. Jaque’s constructions were built out of materials such as shade fabric and piping used for greenhouses and irrigation systems.

In addition, Jaque lobbied to incorporate “non-architectural” elements: a sound system, a projection screen, stage lighting. His idea transformed the piece from

a passive pavilion to an active part of Matadero Madrid's cultural programming. The facilities were made available to the public throughout the summer. Using the center's online tools, participants could book an hour or two for their own performances every Thursday and Friday, the open-mic days. According to Jaque, those days attracted an average of 500 people to the courtyard each week, and word of what was happening spread via the Matadero website, personal blogs and Twitter. The Escaravox installations, activated by a social-media-minded network, brought people to the center who might not have come otherwise, and did so in a way that empowered them.

People Are the Process

"It really helps if you know names," says architect Tom Coward, one of Agents of Change's four principals, when asked how he defines community. "Any abstract concept that exists about a group of people quickly changes when it becomes real people—the people who turn up at council meetings or respond to flyers or e-mails."³ The London-based practice was founded in 2003 by architects Coward, Vincent Lacovara and Geoff Shearcroft, with Daisy Froud, who is not an architect but a specialist in stakeholder engagement and collaborative planning. The architects met while studying at the Royal Academy of Arts and, like Office for Political Innovation and Torolab, believe that small actions can aggregate into larger social transformation. In fact, this core tenet inspired the firm's name. In practice, this means foregrounding public participation and rethinking the role of the architect, as well as the nature of architecture. This ethos of representative and democratic production carries across scales, from temporary pavilions to schools and galleries to neighborhood master plans. AOC's members even sit on advisory design boards for local government.

By searching for new methodologies for engagement, AOC fosters involvement long before design decisions even begin. The firm has institutionalized collaborative techniques and has worked on the development of planning tools, such as the Building Futures Game, which uses creative play to encourage all relevant parties—residents and shopkeepers, developers and local government officials—to envision how different wishes, concerns and policies would change the face of their neighborhood. Developed in collaboration with the Royal Institute of British Architects and Britain's Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (now part of the Design Council), the game was launched in 2008 at an event in the town of Daventry, in order to get input from local citizens on a new master plan. Through the game, the community and developers were able to enter into a productive dialogue and create a redevelopment action plan.

At times, AOC's architecture seems to come from the annals of postmodernism, a period where designers played with forms pulled from history and from vernacular buildings. For instance, a building extension for the Spa School, a secondary school for children with autism in London,



The Building Futures Game, designed by Agents of Change for the Royal Institute of British Architects and the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment.

features peaked and rounded gables that jauntily add pitch and curve across the building's street elevation. The school's brick facade, patterned with coursework, takes inspiration from surrounding Victorian buildings. At first, the vocabulary might seem to be from the playbook of Venturi and Scott Brown, whose projects deliver sociable pop forms. But, although versed in the older practice, AOC approaches each design without an aesthetic agenda. The work is motivated by terms such as "generosity" and "positivity," which lead to eclectic results. At the Spa School, this means interiors that are not pedantic, but playful. The classrooms under the gabled roofs are filled with natural light via large windows and skylights. Although learning environments, they have a domestic feel, which comes from the use of pattern and warm tones—cream, red, brown—in order to ease the autistic students' transition from home to school. On the ground floor, classrooms connect directly to outdoor play areas. These choices emerged directly from research and studying interaction between the school staff and pupils in their classrooms.

AOC reworks how people are involved in making a building, shifting the architect's responsibility. "It's our job to make meaning together with the users or the neighbors," says Froud, who fervently believes that architecture cannot be separated from its social context.⁴ Indeed, the need to build meaning through participatory processes is an ethos evident in Jaque's and Cárdenas Osuna's work, even as their practices pursue different solutions. Torolab embeds itself in communities, the Office for Political Engagement makes visible and gives agency to unseen social networks, and AOC guides stakeholders through a participatory development process. ○

1. All Raúl Cárdenas Osuna quotes from an interview in Tijuana with the author, Dec. 27, 2013.
2. All Andrés Jaque quotes from a Skype interview with the author, Dec. 12, 2013.
3. Tom Coward quote from a Skype interview with the author, Dec. 17, 2013.
4. Daisy Froud quote from a Skype interview with the author, Dec. 17, 2013.