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Chapter 4

An Interview with Andrés Jaque, Office for Political Innovation

Albena Yaneva: How should we understand design practice and its relation to the material and the living world? What is the role of design if nature is no longer passive and salient enough to provide a background for human activities?

Andrés Jaque: The first implication is that design, as a relevant intervention in daily enactments, is not to be found in the initial formulations of design proposals, but in the trajectories and evolutions they become part of. I do not think that Mies van der Rohe's intentions are the ones that are performed now by the society which the pavilion is part of, or at least not to a great extent. This means that the effects of design are not the direct result of the pre-defined programs on which designed entities are founded, but rather of the way their programs interact with a great number of other entities and are reconstructed within time as part of that process. As a practicing architect, this is quite obvious to me, because I have very often seen how designed assemblages always evolve into different compositions that gain a broad independence in their performance. That makes them differ from the way their evolution was predicted during the "design process."

The way politics are embodied in design is not by forcing designed devices to perform a certain external-to-design previously-defined project. Devices are not neutral transmitters of politics, but instead they do contribute to the making of politics. Their political effect is however neither fixed, as it evolves with time, nor absolute, for they share and dispute it with a large number of heterogeneous entities.

It is also important to consider that the distribution of roles during design processes needs to be reconsidered. There is no such thing as designers and designed entities, but encounters of things in which all of them design and all of them, somehow, are designed, as part of the same process. But the way each of them is designing and the way each of them is designed is not equivalent. It is very clear how, when it comes to natural entities, there is a participation of those entities in the evolution of the

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compositions they are part of; a participation that needs to be accounted for as a designing contribution.

As a designer, it is of great concern to me to find ways to escape from an approach to my work based on the idea that there is first a phase of design, followed by one of realization, ending with one of occupation and use. This idea is accepted uncritically by most designers. The way design practices are institutionalized in the places where I have worked is pretty much based on this idea, which, strangely enough, has nothing to do with the way things happen when we carefully look at them. It has been very important for me trying to replace that by a successive-attempts-based design process. The way in which material realities are constituted and composed with/within/as living realities can distribute designers' contributions in a similar spatial and temporal pattern to that in which those compositions are produced.

The participation of nature in material compositions makes it inevitable to think of design as an activity where interscalarity is managed. Your work "Scaling Up and Down. Extraction Trials in Architectural Design" (Yaneva 2005) has been of great importance to clarify practices that, without us being quite aware of how they operated, have been important in the projects we have developed at the Office for Political Innovation. Any object participates and performs in/as a certain network of relations, dependencies, disputes and so on that attaches it to other things and other evolutions, actually many of them. But when we design compositions with what, in daily life and in ordinary speech, are thoughts as "natural beings," there is only one way to even consider providing any sustainability in the way their participation is imagined. It requires that we account for them as beings that are enacted in a multiscalar construction contributing to demands imposed on the design process. For instance, including water lilies in the Barcelona Pavilion's assemblage, as we saw in the "Phantom. Mies as Rendered Society" project (Jaque 2013), automatically meant that tiny beings, such as those that decomposed the water of the lake, or huge ones, such as the number of sun hours on which the speed of the water lilies' growth depended, needed to be introduced as active participants of the design. Again, this presents basic practical problems. To encode into a disciplinary intelligence the presence of those heterogeneous beings has required a great deal of disciplinary recomposition. The

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participation of different disciplines in a design process is regulated, in most cases, by a certain understanding that each of these disciplines takes care independently of the decisions directly related to one scale of the design process. In practical terms this means that each scale of design is intended by humans to be practiced by a segregated disciplinary sphere (urbanism, architecture, interior design, industrial design). But of course, in practice it is never like that, and when we carefully look into these design performances there are many devices and practices to operate in the transience between different scales. In the case of Barcelona's water lilies it was not the architects who, in the first place – when they started to work on designing the reconstruction of Mies's pavilion in the 1980s – accounted for the micro-organisms decomposing the water, but the installation's designers. They automatically decided to remove the actors making the ponds' water green, as outsiders to the social arrangement of the lakes. By doing this, the impossibility for architects in the future to take the decision of accommodating water lilies in the lake was rendered costly. But a few years later the architects developed glass boxes to produce a tentative accommodation of the water lilies that somehow challenged the scalar disciplinary distribution.

Albena Yaneva: This is an excellent example that illustrates how your design work turns nature into cause for thinking and mobilizes a variety of entities in new compositions? Can you provide more examples?

Andrés Jaque: It has been a constant in my work to consider as political the long series of endeavors and technologies that are deployed when it comes to bringing together different realities. In the case of the "House in Never Never Land," a secondary house in Cala Vadella Valley in Ibiza (Jaque 2010) that my office has been designing and building since 2007, the process was traversed by the demands of a large arboreal mass, the habitat of many animal species (Figure 4.1). We wished to reconcile the hedonistic life the owners wanted to develop within the house, with the preservation of that natural milieu. This required the production of documents, models, drawings and so on. The first thing that was required was to spend weeks onsite and, with the help of some instruments produced ad hoc, to

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record in detail the species, position, and form of each tree and bush. We mapped all that in CAD files so that we could start to accommodate, in a common vectorial digital space, the owners' demands for the design, along with the presence of the trees and bushes.

[Insert Figure 4.1 here]

Figure 4.1 Detailed mapping of trees and bushes present in the lot where "House in Never Never Land" was to be constructed.

The design process was especially long. A great number of models and plans had to be produced to make sure that the presence of trees was compatible with the structure and the layout needed to ensure views on the valley and the Mediterranean coast from all parts of the house, while maximizing the real state value of the house and a diversity of marketable divisions of it (Figure 4.2). All this required that we identify principles to help us to discuss those different presences in the house: from words, to basic tactics. But we also had to produce models and drawings that enabled those discussions to be continued over time and to be kept at the center of a number of actions whereby design decisions were taken.

[Insert Figure 4.2 here]

Figure 4.2 Roof plan. "House in Never Never Land," Cala Vadella, Ibiza, 2007–2009.

A number of additional decisions were taken to make these different realities compatible. For instance:

1. Concentrating most equipment and services in a more or less isolated concrete tank, to prevent any risk of a damaging accidental spill on the ground that would jeopardize the survival of the trees, bushes, and animals. It also helped other aspects of the design: for example it made it easy to accommodate the swimming pool in it, and provided stability

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to the overall structure. So that reinforced concrete tank in itself brought together many presences.

2. Most of the construction was raised on steel columns, and the land underneath was kept unpaved, so the permeability of the ground, on which the trees' existence depended, could be preserved.
3. The structure of the buildings was layered so no trees had to be cut down, but still the house was placed where it was needed to cater to the owners' demands (Figures 4.3 and 4.4). With the accumulation of many adjustments it ended up being quite an irregular structure that again required numerous specific models, drawings and meetings. And in all those meetings trees were part of the talk.

[Insert Figure 4.3 here]

Figure 4.3 Construction site. "House in Never Never Land," Cala Vadella, Ibiza, 2008.

[Insert Figure 4.4. here]

Figure 4.4 Construction site. "House in Never Never Land," Cala Vadella, Ibiza, 2008.

Many other things were needed to accommodate a number of diverse entities on common ground. At some point, during the construction process, new realities emerged. Some of those new realities were not included in the models. The rush that governs building sites made it impossible for us to react on time and to produce the necessary documents, models, and designs. Without them, and with machines and people operating on site, there was no way to have tactics to properly bring an inclusive articulation into those parts of the process. For instance, at some point the intended vehicles' access to the site was changed by the contractor without further notice. He decided to open a new route for heavy vehicles to approach the construction, and to do so a number of trees were felled. Even though initially they would have been extremely easy to preserve, since they were not in the way of any construction and there were alternative possibilities for access to the plot, we thought it was not needed to dedicate efforts to include them in plans, documents, design adjustments, or

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models. This lack of attachment to the design composition and to the material devices where that composition was being constructed (plans, documents, conversations, models, and so on) made them weaker and caused them to disappear.

It seems strange, now that the house has been inhabited for more than five years already. The trees that remain in the house five years after its construction, are those that we succeed to include in the models, drawings and conversations (Figures 4.5, 4.6, 4.7). The persistence of trees was directly related to their presence and participation in the devices through which the site was being composed. Those preserved were included in the models, drawings and conversations in the first place, because someone thought they were likely to disappear as a result of the construction process. Those trees and bushes that we considered initially unlikely to be damaged, and therefore they were not included in the discussions or in the documents and models by/in which the discussion happened, ended up disappearing. The persistence of trees, bushes and the animals living in association with them, was directly related to their presence in the diversity of material devices by which/where the construction process happened. For me this is very interesting, because the idea that nature is just what happens when architecture and social assemblage are avoided does not work here.

[Insert Figures 4.5, 4.6, and 4.7 here]

Figure 4.5 "House in Never Never Land," Cala Vadella, Ibiza, 2007–2009.

Figure 4.6 "House in Never Never Land," Cala Vadella, Ibiza, 2007–2009.

Figure 4.7 "House in Never Never Land," Cala Vadella, Ibiza, 2007–2009.

Albena Yaneva: How does your work contribute to "slowing down" reasoning, "slowing down" the construction of the common world, and creating a space for hesitation?

Andrés Jaque: It is a significant part of my practice to find the way to slow down processes that otherwise would be considered even automatic. In many of our works I would say that it has been our main contribution to the process. But to slow down a specific construction is not something that you

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can do alone. It requires the enrolment of a large number of forces, and it definitively requires the development of material devices.

In 2004 we were called to intervene at Mount Gaiás, 1 km from Santiago de Compostela in Galicia. It had been a natural space, quite intensively inserted in the life of the surrounding neighborhoods that were associated to that landscape in many different ways. In 1999 the regional government of Galicia, under the impetus of the so-called Bilbao effect, had decided to run an international competition – that Peter Eisenman Architects won – to transform it into the current Cidade da Cultura. At the time Mount Gaiás, as an ecosystem, was already totally transformed. As a result of an intense earthmoving activity, its vegetation cover had been totally removed and its topography and pluvial regime was no longer the one the neighbors related to; it started to reproduce what had been decided in the models and plans that the different architects and engineering teams had produced. All that had triggered a certain level of social unrest, which prompted the project managers to call us and ask us to design a nice wooden fence all around the building site so that it would be rendered invisible to the neighbors. According to the authors of our commission, they expected this to put an end to the unrest. We proposed not to build a fence but to use the money instead to carry out what we called "12 Actions to Make Peter Eisenman Transparent." The 12 Actions were small adjustments on the building site, so that they could bring to the site a discussion with a broad and diverse public. The actions included things such as providing a line of buses to enable people to access the site; or color codes to make transparent the amount of resources each construction company was mobilizing; or meeting places where publics not directly related to the companies or consultancies working on the construction of Cidade da Cultura could meet and discuss. This is only one of a series of works (such as the Skin Gardens or the 1 L Oil Banquette) in which there was an intention to involve actors not directly concerned in the discussions where decisions were taken.

It was interesting to see how things reached a point in Santiago in which the controversies activated by the construction, partially fueled by the effect of the 12 Actions, started to call for a transformation of the initial plans. At that point the 12 Actions were canceled. We were told that there was a "need to speed up the end of the construction" and that maintaining the 12 Actions "made the

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process slower." We proposed a number of ways to keep the 12 Actions running, and in the last meeting we had, the Director of Fundación Cidade da Cultura explained it quite clearly:

> Why are we even talking about this, this is exactly what we do not need now that we have to finish the works before the discontent becomes unbearable.

In 2013 we developed a project for RED CAT/CalArts (Figure 4.8). The way we worked was to study a very small number of particular ecosystemic constructions in Los Angeles, and to find the way to extract from those compositions some knowledge that we could use to re-enact them in a series of ecosystemic prototypes through which the knowledge could travel and be re-associated with new publics and contexts. One of the cases was the vegetable garden that a man, Abel, had built at the back yard of his suburban house in Silver Lake. He had been brought up in Colonia, Uruguay. In the 1960s his family sold their house to a company that was consolidating farming land by demolishing and bringing together a large number of small family properties. This transformation in the way people, land and houses related to each other was perceived, by the people affected, as a very fast and radical one. Our work consisted on reconstructing the broader network of architectures and other things that participated in that process. The composition in Colonia ended up re-accommodating Abel, first in Alaska and then in Silver Lake. Something similar happened to his siblings and friends. Within a 30-year period they had all built gardens in the places where they lived, from Venezuela to Italy, where they grew vegetables like the ones they had had in Colonia when they were all living there. They would discuss their gardens via Skype almost every day and would post each other seeds of the exceptional crops they had every season. We can see this new setting as a recomposed version of the society they were part of in the Colonia of the 1950s. The use of Skype, associated to their gardens and the circulation of seeds could be seen as a way to code a shared intelligence effective on reenacting social constructions. It took Abel years to gain insight into how potatoes reacted to weather in Alaska, but he finally included them in his backyard. The same was needed in order to make seeds travel. All that could only be achieved in a tentative trial-and-error dynamic. What was interesting for me was how that whole enactment was a reaction and a response to the superfast transformation of the assemblage that brought together people, plants, land, and property distribution in a fragmented-but-

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connected network. It seems as if the accelerated transformation effected by mass fruit traders in Colonia was radically successful. Yet, when considered in detail, with a broader description of the evolution of Abel's enactment, it can be argued that the enactment was reconstructed to produce a relational scheme where a slow restitution of an evolved version of the Colonia composition of the 1950s could be approached by means of intense but slow collective design work. This is quite important for me. The possibility to slow down processes is often related to their collective dimension and to redistributing the relational scheme by which they happen.

[Insert Figure 4.8 here]

Figure 4.8 Abel in Silver Lake. "Different Kinds of Water Pouring into a Swimming Pool." Roy and Edna Disney/CalArts Theater (REDCAT), Los Angeles, California, 2013.

This was very important for the "Escaravox" project that we have been working on for five years now, and in which our design work has never been considered finished. The three-year period in which the devices have been used is part of a never-ending tentative-based design process. For instance, we are now designing and constructing new devices to add to the "Escaravox." These devices are a material reaction to some of the challenges and conflicts that happened during this three past years.

In order to make the "Escaravox" something that maximizes its potential to be associated to other entities, we made them inexpensive. We also divided them into many independent but relatable pieces and over-equipped them with technologies available to cater for a wide range of situations. The composition of technologies and other things that are mobilized by them evolves with time. Only a tiny part of the entities that now compose the "Escaravox" have been designed by our studio, but those that we designed in the first place are still part of the multiple enactments that the "Escaravox" triggers. That relational wealth was in part possible because the constellation was equipped with an informal constitution that makes it easy for people, groups, and technologies to associate to it.

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Albena Yaneva: "To think" in the Deleuzian sense means to resist ready interpretations. How does your work contribute to resisting consensual ways of presenting phenomena related to nature? How do you "activate thinking" through design?

Andrés Jaque: That has been something we have tried with many different tactics. In the "Plasencia Clergy House" (Figure 4.9) we designed a catalogue of political toys that operated in different ways, but mainly by making it necessary for users to develop knowledge and to perform it, in order to take decisions required to make the architecture usable. Only through that process could they relate to the toys.

[Insert Figure 4.9 here]

Figure 4.9 Political Toys. "Plasencia Clergy House," Plasencia, 2004.

The "Skin Garden" project was very important for us as an experiment that helped us to test a way of thinking architectural practices. We designed, constructed, and distributed a number of jewels that were actually models of the landscapes related to the daily actions that many people usually perform on their skin. We catalogued a number of them, from perfuming the skin with specific components, to applying anti-aging collagen lotion on it. The jewels represent the image of those other places: mines, laboratories. They are models of mines, petrol extraction towers, and so on, and as such were intended to bring into daily conversations the interscalar connections by which they were made possible. The people wearing them had to sign a contract with us, undertaking to wear them only when those connections were actual, on the days they had performed actions on their skin that contributed to those connections being produced (Figures 4.10, 4.11, 4.12, 4.13,). They also undertook to inform us of the contents of those conversations by sending us postcards with drawings and transcriptions.

[Insert Figure 4.10 here]

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Figure 4.10 Postcard. "Skin Gardens." Collection of political jewelry, 2007.

[Insert Figure 4.11 here]

Figure 4.11 Contract. "Skin Gardens." Collection of political jewelry, 2007.

[Insert Figure 4.12 here]

Figure 4.12 "Skin Gardens." Collection of political jewelry, 2007.

[Insert Figure 4.13 here]

Figure 4.13 "Skin Gardens." Collection of political jewelry, 2007.

The previous works I mentioned were not directly intended to affect architecture as a discipline. Often we have found intense resistance from architects and architectural institutions, among which there is a strong attachment to modern paradigms, to understanding or accepting cosmopolitical notions of social construction and their appeals to architecture.. But in order to gain in criticality and a capacity to act, we need to gain allies within our discipline and to connect with those who could share our interests. Mainly to have an impact on our colleagues and on the way we relate with them, we recently produced an opera, "Superpowers of Ten," that was presented in the last Lisbon Triennial (Figure 4.14). It consisted of a performative analog version of the 1977 second version of the movie "Powers of Ten" by Charles and Ray Eames. The original movie presents the architectural change of scale as something unproblematic that can be delegated to technical automatisms. We did a slowed down version of it in which many discussions, knowledges, actors and controversies, unrepresented in the original version, were included. The final scene presents all the actors (in this case most of them are not human).

[Insert Figure 4.14 here]

Figure 4.14 "Superpowers of Ten." *Close Closer, 3ª Edição Trienal de Arquitectura de Lisboa* (12 September 2013–15 December 2013).

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Albena Yaneva: How do you make explicit the connection of humans to a variety of entities with differing ontologies? What are the specific techniques used to create new conditions and new spaces for their co-habitation?

Andrés Jaque: A first basic need is to recognize that architecture is not only the architecture produced by architects, and that even architectures officially designed by architects are participated in and affect many other actors. Moreover, architectural objects never happen alone, and part of their social inclusion depends on the way they relate to other entities. This implies that design as an occupation needs to include a great deal of detailed observation and scrutiny.

The main difficulty is always to find the tactics to provide a certain level of symmetry in the participation of those ontologies. We are not happy when the inclusion of other entities happens as an extension of our own ontologies, for instance by trying to include those others in our drawings as passive decorative presences. To avoid this we try to find the conflicts that make it problematic to compose a diversity of entities together. Those problems require adaptations in many directions, which end up mobilizing a more symmetrical distribution of adjustments. In practical terms, it requires us to divide the action into a series of actions. We need to get closer to a way of managing design in which, instead of it being dealt with as something that progressively jumps from paper and digital spaces to edification, and from less to more detail, it requires a timing in which no step is ever completed and those apparently successive steps keep appearing, as long as the co-habitation is current. It also requires an approach in which a high level of revision can be included throughout the process. We can consider that repeated revision will concentrate efforts on the problematic evolution of articulations, and that "discussion" does not necessarily mean human deliberation but, for instance, the putting in place of alternative versions of the compositions so that they can gain a place in which to be experimented with.

In my case it has also required me to diversify my engagement in architectural practices into a number of activities. These are organized to acquire a social distribution symmetrical to that of the enactment in which architecture is being produced. Teaching, publishing and being part of debates has

been important to gain a certain independence from something that, in my opinion, weakens the possibility of architecture obtaining social relevance: the divorce between the actual performance of architectural realities and the underlying modern ideological paradigm that, to a certain extent, prevails in architects' discourses. To contribute to making available alternatives to that divorce requires strong engagement in restaging what architecture can be, not only by means of design but also in the daily performance of its discussion, its teaching, its researching, and its exhibition.

A third practical requirement is the need to find ways of working that enable multidisciplinarity, something that can only be achieved with time, by constructing long running networks of discussion and cooperation between different perspectives and practices. I have engaged in that, by maintaining formal and informal cooperation with a number of people and institutions external to architecture, by being interested in how architecture is being discussed by people who are not architects, and by contributing to the development of methodologies and opportunities for the projects to involve practitioners from different fields. And I have also done so by reinforcing architectural traditions that tend to be disregarded, such as that of engaging in fieldwork, in dedicating time to scrutinize the trajectories of designs, and to deliberating with others to collectively construct the definition of problems or needs.

The last consideration, but probably the most important, is the acceptance that there is no possibility for holistic visions of reality, and that the notion of universality does not correspond to the fragmentation and specific particularity of which any composition is made of. It implies that only pragmatism can make design relevant, and that a huge effort needs to be made to install architecture in the contexts where it intends to operate.

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