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IN CONVERSATION WITH
ANDRÉS JAQUE

Andrés Jaque is founder and director of the Office for Political Innovation (Madrid and New York), and associate professor and director of the Master of Science program in Advanced Architectural Design at the Columbia University Graduate School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation. His practice develops architectural projects that bring inclusivity into daily life. Through built works, performances, and exhibitions, his work instigates crucial debates for contemporary architecture. Recently, his research has explored dating apps and the role these technologies play in society. **Colin Curley** caught up with Andrés in New York on behalf of LA+ Journal.

+ Your design work encompasses a spectrum of architecture interiors, film, exhibit design, teaching, and performance. How do these different methods of design exploration and production work together within your practice?

It's a very good question. The reason my practice is so diversified is because reality is diversified. So, in order to gain an agency and be relevant to architecture, I ended up doing many different things and connecting them. This is something that has two directions for me. One is towards the future: how I will reinvent daily life, society, and the world we live by (and I would say *by*, rather than *in*). That means that we have to reinvent space, but also connections, infrastructures, and performances and the way we understand them.

It also works backwards. By connecting all these different practices, we also can look back to our built architecture and realize that we could never really understand buildings without looking at the way they were used, the way they would perform, the way they were discussed, and the way things that happen at different scales came together through architecture. For me it's been an adventure that was meant to help me gain an agency in the reinvention of daily life, but also helped me understand much better what architecture is about, and what it's been about.

+ That's a good segue into what you explore through your practice. As the name of your practice, Office for Political Innovation, suggests, your work explores the broader social, societal, and political dimensions of architecture and the built environment. How do you define the politics of architecture within your practice, and engage them or work with them through your projects?

Often, we hear that architecture is about providing boxes or containers in which society can be accommodated. I'm totally against this notion because I believe architecture is a part of society, never a neutral container for it. It mediates between actors that are very different – for instance, between mountains or the atmosphere, and people, animals, or machines. What brings them together is architecture.

So, I believe architecture is a mediator that is never just neutral, but connects things with distinct qualities. We can define those qualities as political because they help define what gets connected and what remains disconnected, and because the act of mediation can only be described through terms like "alliance," "sponsorship," "association," "confrontation," and "dispute." All these terms belong to the realm of politics.

But the politics I'm interested in are not the politics of political parties or spoken words. I'm interested in the politics that can be done through material devices or through performances: through design, in general terms. For instance, when we design a ramp, we make it possible for people with wheelchairs to access a location and participate in events that would otherwise be inaccessible. Those are the kinds of politics that I'm interested in: the ones that are done through ramps, through doors, through walls, through structures, through services, pipes, and lights. And that's precisely what I would call material politics, or design politics. In the long run, these politics often gain much more importance than those of spoken words, and that's why I think architecture is very exciting now – precisely because it's political, but can be political in a very particular way.

For me, it's important to understand that whatever we do, the objects we produce, the situations we help facilitate are kinds of artifacts. They're not neutral components, but are loaded with agency. That's why I think that we have to find the right terminology to talk about that, and I think the terms "device" and "artifact" are ones that we can all understand, and through which we gain a certain level of capacity to transform things. I would say that it also brings to common ground things that initially could be seen as very different.

For me, for instance, the cell phone is not that different from a building, a big piece of land, or a fracking well. It's a kind of architecture, and we have to find words that enable us to include them in the same conversation. For instance, the conversion of heating systems in New York City from oil to gas was immediately related to the emergence of fracking in areas very close to New York State. In the Susquehanna Valley of Pennsylvania, for example, the heating systems in homes are not independent from the drilling wells. We have to find a way of thinking about architecture that makes it possible to understand many different things as part of the same reality.

+ On the topic of the role of technology in society, in a previous interview, you stated that technology is not only technological devices, but how society is reconstructed by the insertion of those devices. With that in mind, could you expand on how you approach technology, both in critical and practical terms, within your practice?

I can tell you about a project that we did that is quite small, but is probably the largest one that we've done in political terms. It's a project called Escaravox and it's just a pair of shading devices. We can put the two of them in a truck and move them around, but when they deploy they are shading devices that are equipped with speakers, computers, projectors, and lighting systems. They're made available for people to use freely, and typically have more than 500 users every night. People gather around them and spend the night there, playing music, showing photographs to their friends, and organizing lectures. During the day, there is one university that organizes master classes there.

These devices are not very much about material mobilization. They're actually very small in terms of their materiality, but they're huge in their capacity to mobilize society. For me, this is very important. I could say that the architecture I'm interested in is hairy architecture – architecture that has hairs that connect it with other things. When you look at architecture in this way, then you see that the relational dimension is much more expansive than what most buildings get to mobilize, and I think this is crucial.

When we think, for instance, of the architectures that are shaping contemporary life, often they are architectures that even become invisible. For instance, we've been studying Grindr and other hookup apps for a long time. The technology, the servers, and the team that are running Grindr are quite tiny. There are only 92 people for something that is used in almost every country in the world. And Grindr has around 10 million users, so it's actually the size of a country, but it's something that you can fit in a volleyball court. A volleyball court has transformed the way many people relate to each other in the world, all around the world.

I think we need to readjust what it is that we consider scale in architecture. I think that the architectures that are most relevant now are interscalar, in that they decouple their material investment from the social mobilization they are able to initiate.
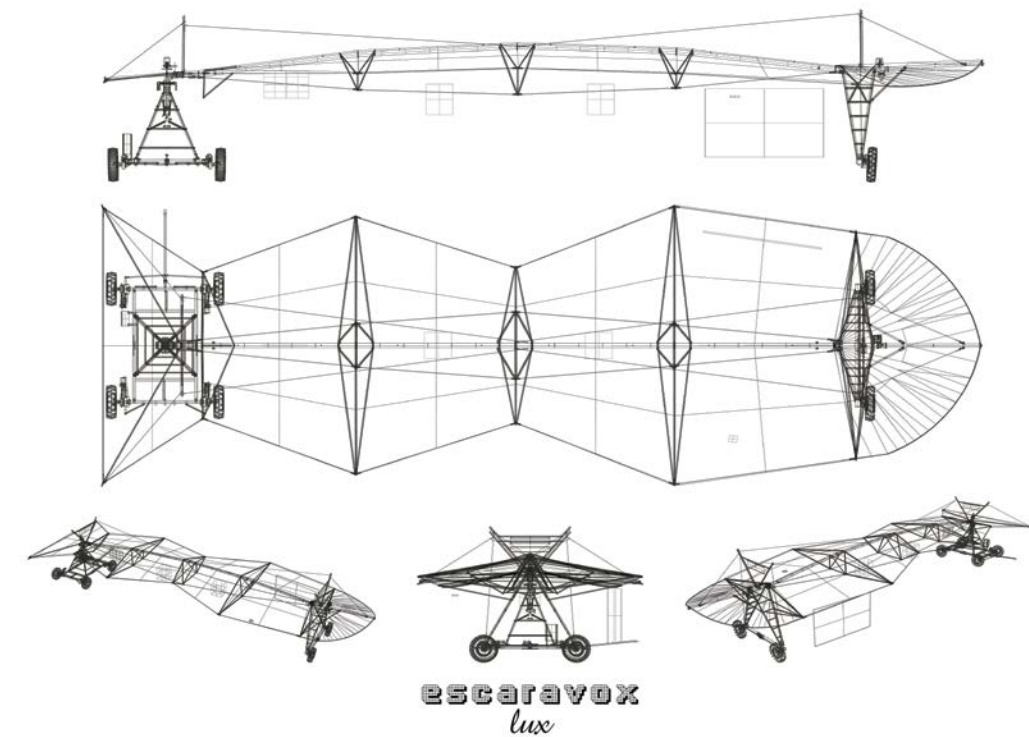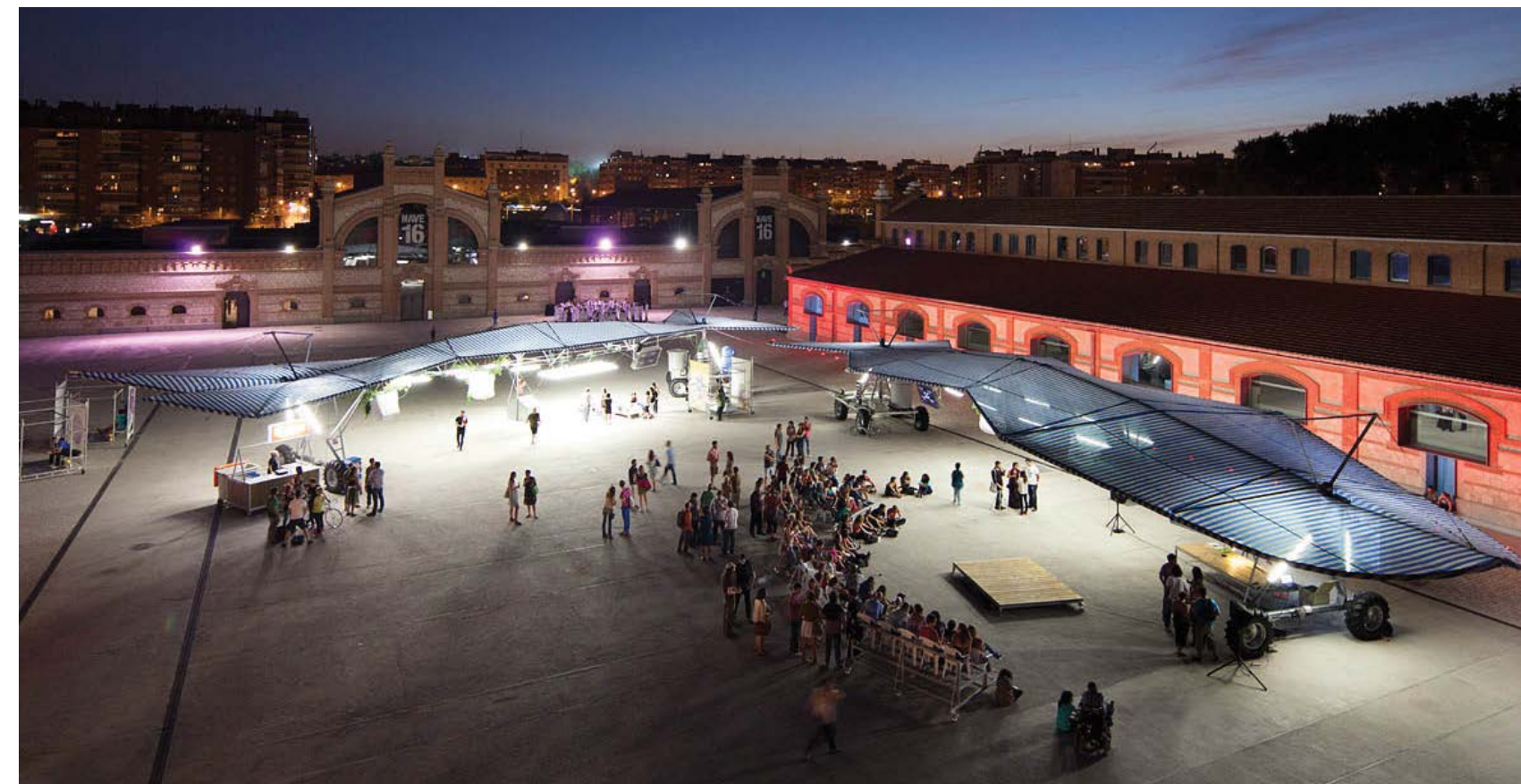
Opposite: Escaravox, Madrid (2012).

escaravox
lux

What I've learned is that architecture never happens alone, and it's very important to find ways to design heterogeneous constellations of architectures. I will give you an example. If you look at the way people meet in a romantic way now, discos and clubs are no longer that important. When you look at places like the Meatpacking District, that in the '80s was at the very heart of the nightlife in New York City, it's no longer possible to see the same scenarios of social interaction that were once very easy to spot.

What is happening now takes place in the combination of cell phones with apartments, because, nevertheless, Chelsea is one of the world's favorite locations for Grindr users to switch on their apps. Why? Because the apartment towers and the High Line became kind of a desirable and very aspirational location. And the combination of these different architectures is mobilized through Grindr as a possibility for people to satisfy the desire to meet someone.

What is interesting for me is that we can learn from that. What can public space–collective space for interaction, the space for urbanity–learn from the possibility of combining and articulating different technologies to produce what in the past could be done just with space, or mostly with space? I believe the future of architecture will be in the way all these different technologies (and by technology I mean apartments, buildings, parks, and streets as much as home computers and laptops) can be articulated from design.

So, I think the next design–the design that will gain relevance or that will bring architecture into relevance–is probably the one that mediates heterogeneous technologies. And the problem is that we're not ready for that, so we need to transform our training, transform our tools, and define for ourselves new ways of working and even new ways of engaging in society. We need to seek new possibilities for clients to make ourselves more visible. And that is the challenge that, in a way, we all share.

SHOULD THE PLANET
BE A DESIGN PROJECT?

IF MARS IS THE ANSWER,
WHAT IS THE QUESTION?

Opposite: Still from Pornified Homes (2016).
Above: Rendering of The Future Starts Here exhibition (2018).

I think there are two questions here. The first one I would respond to by saying that architects are no longer solo creators. We are understanding that we have to work in networks of different professionals and different knowledges. Multidisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity are not options now. Relevance only happens when people with different knowledges get together, and that is something that is already reshaping the way we understand architectural design practices.

The second question I think is equally relevant, and it's about scale. I believe that we have to go beyond the distribution of scales to specialties in architectural practices. We're used to thinking that architecture needs different people to deal with the finer scale of industrial design, interior design, and furniture design. Then we have architects dealing with buildings, architect-engineers dealing with big buildings and skyscrapers, and urban designers to deal with the scale of a district. We have urbanists who deal with planning, and we even have territorial planners.

I think this practice of segregating by scales is very counterproductive. The challenge now is to find ways to develop practices that can be trans-scalar – that can operate at the tiny scale of a table, or even smaller, and do it in a way that a big change can be produced at the scale of the environment. Equally, when we are operating in the environment, we probably want to test what is happening at the small scale.

You can think, for instance, of Equinox, because Equinox designs the bodies of people as much as it is becoming a real estate agency bringing huge transformations to parts of cities and contributing to gentrification. At the same time, they develop a transnational network of interventions that end up having a scale that no city could reach. So I think that when we look at things like Equinox, we can understand that architecture can gain agency, but operate in between and across different scales.

Yes. I think we perceive an appetite to rethink the role architecture can play in turning our daily life political. And by that, I mean that many of us are feeling that civil society is being threatened – that it's been impoverished in the last years. The historical role of architecture to empower the polis and to think of urbanity as the origin of citizenship, I think, is at stake.

Architects have an opportunity to consider our traditions and think about how we can make them current. What is the update that we need to become relevant? What I've seen from my research is that most of the innovations in human and non-human interaction have been developed on the side of individual interests, and I think there's a great need to rethink those innovations and even invent new ones that can turn things collective, and help produce civil society.

+   So, given the diversity of
your research and built work,
how do you define success as a
designer?

I find success in the capacity of architecture to empower the valuable alternative. I will give you an example. In the last years, the infrastructures that deal with wastewater in New York have been totally centralized and black-boxed. They have been made inaccessible, and even imperceptible, making people think that waste can disappear, when what happens is that is sent to other places that have less capacity to make decisions about their environmental quality. This segregation of toxicity is a way of producing inequality.

So, by looking at the way wastewater is dealt with in a place like New York, we can see what is happening to rising rents and the disappearance of low-income people in the city. When we did the installation Cosmo for the MoMA PS1 Young Architect's Program, we were trying to bring an alternative to that, using the huge visibility of the PS1 to raise an issue. We can think of toxicity in different terms. We can design cohabitation with toxicity and by doing that we can have a say in the way our societies are dealing with inequality. If we could reimagine New York City as a place where toxicity can be dealt with here, then I think we can probably find a better society happening, a much more exciting one, and in the long run, even one that has a much stronger, resilient economy.

So architecture is a little bit of a David versus Goliath, with the capacity to present alternatives. Alternatives have a very unexpected trajectory and I'm sure that within a few years, the discussion in New York will be how to bring back the toxicity. When we track this, there will be a number of initiatives, and maybe Cosmo is one of them, that will come from the realm of architecture.

+   On the topic of technology
and the future, you've recently
been involved in The Future
Starts Here exhibition at the
Victoria and Albert Museum in
London. What can you tell us
about that exhibition?

I'm particularly excited to work on this exhibition because it is part of the V&A's tradition of discovering the design of our environments by understanding how society is constructed. The way people dress, their rooms, their highways, are crucial in understanding what possibilities they find as citizens to connect with other things and to engage with others.

The second thing I'm happy with is that the exhibition presented a big design challenge. How do you render things that are so ordinary, or how do you render the tensions that are embodied in ordinary situations, in a way that they become visible and easy to discuss by people who are used to seeing them without paying much attention? I think this challenge has been a great opportunity for us to grow and to learn a lot about the way design plays a key role in the making of what is possible and what is likely to be possible.

+   Based on that experience, are
you optimistic about the future
in terms of what design can do to
address some of the challenges
we face in society today?

Above: Cosmo (2015).
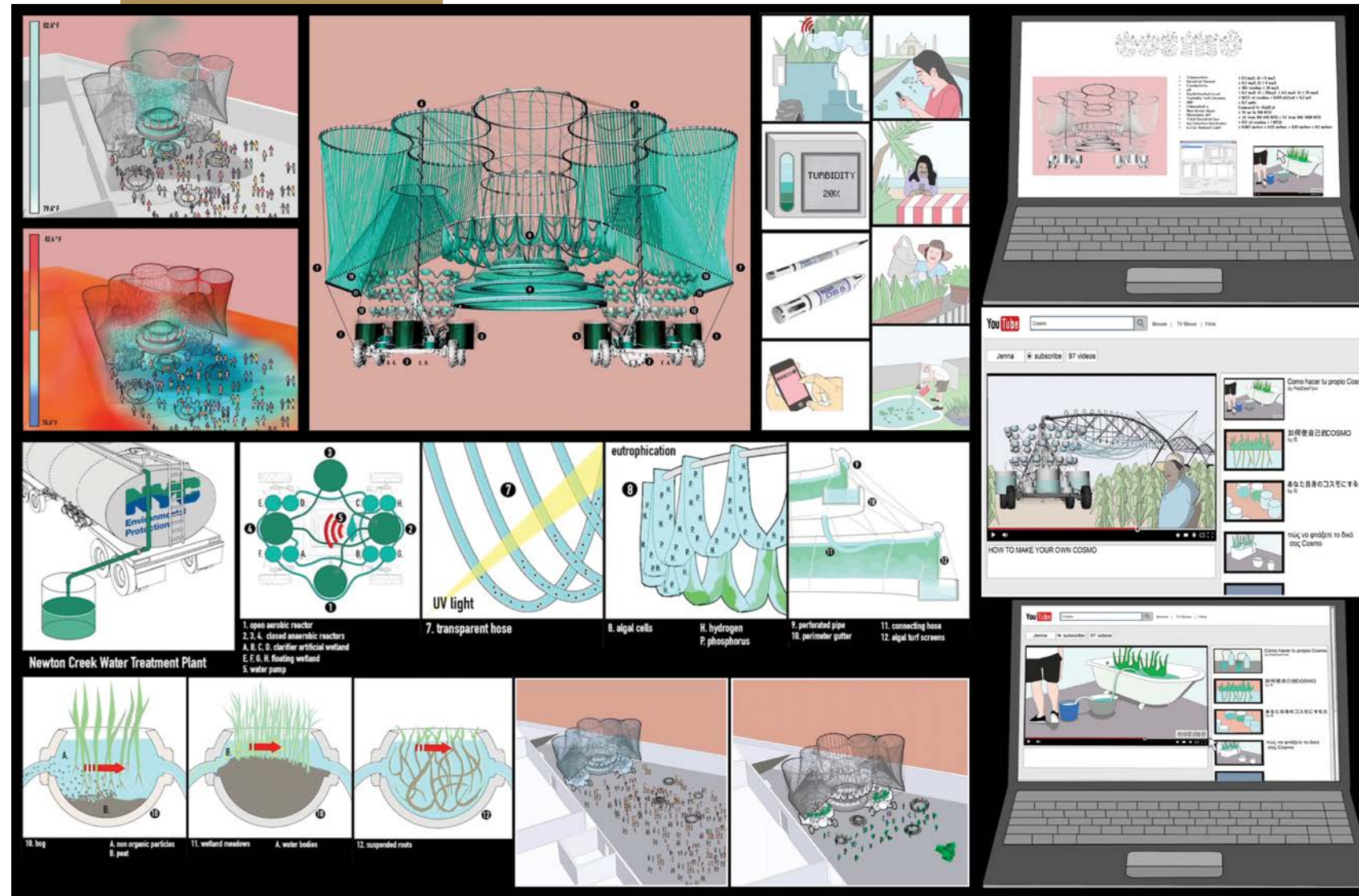
I feel we're probably in a post-optimism situation. We have evidence that there are many things going wrong now that we cannot stop. We have to use our capacities to change things and also to understand that what we do has a great capacity to present alternatives, and to reinvent what happens around us. I'm trying to work forward from the question of whether we're optimistic or pessimistic to see what it is we can do to change things. And there's a lot we can do. I think that, in a way, brings an energy and a feeling of connection with others that also creates momentum; and I think that momentum is a good current alternative to optimism.

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