

# CHANGE THEY BELIEVE IN

*Five American architectural pioneers discuss the merits of thinking big, how teaching informs practice, and the value of aesthetics. Obama, are you listening?*

INTERVIEW JOHN GENDALL



At the Venice Architecture Biennale, the US Pavilion “Workshopping” presents activist practices, where architects initiate projects by first identifying problems and then set out to proactively solve them.

Organized by Atlanta’s High Museum of Art in collaboration with nonprofit 306090, Inc., the project’s curators selected practices that represent what the pavilion’s subtitle terms “an American model of architectural practice.” They looked for the kind of bootstrap ingenuity that US politicians love to praise. For example, cityLAB at UCLA, a nonprofit think tank, combs LA for architectural projects that can remedy urban problems. Archeworks is a Chicago-based school and organization that collaborates with other nonprofits to address social conditions in the city using architecture and design. And Terreform does a kind of R&D for ethical architectural practices.

In the shade of “Instant Untitled,” a MOS-designed inflatable installation, *Surface* sat down with Dana Cuff and Roger Sherman (cityLAB), Martin Felsen and Sarah Dunn (Archeworks), and Michael Sorkin (Terreform) to talk about the contemporary avant-garde, design education and capitalist confections.

*In what ways are your practices what this pavilion calls “activist practices”?*

**DANA CUFF:** We initiate our projects. None of us responds to a client request per se. At cityLAB, we act as a bridge between professional practice and the university. The university does research, but doesn’t build projects. And practices need to respond to where there are funds, clients and sites. A lot of issues just don’t fit into either of those models. We initiate ideas and work for architects. But you just can’t do that unless you have liberation from the day-to-day office world tied to bills and payroll—and more bills.

**MICHAEL SORKIN:** One of the things I have done for 30 years is what we refer to as unsolicited master-planning, which is to say you find some vexed situation in a city and you present alternatives that promote better design.

**MARTIN FELSEN:** We don’t really seek out problems. We just assume that everything is a problem.

*What are some of the problems you’re tackling?*

**DC:** We started right after Katrina. After 9/11, when the Twin Towers collapsed, we didn’t really see architects stepping into the Lower Manhattan rebuilding project, so we needed to invent a way for architects to get engaged in those critical urban projects. Our approach is a much more contemporary, forward-looking way of dealing with urbanism.

**ROGER SHERMAN:** After Katrina, *Architectural Record* had a competition where they asked architects to solve—so-called “solve”—the rebuilding project in New Orleans by designing single buildings. That scale is inadequate as a means of engaging problems.

**MS:** Our project is about making New York City completely self-sufficient, which is a proposition that many people would consider ridiculous, yet I think we can prove the possibility of what we’re arguing for. We generate a vast collection of data that have practical solutions. One of the outcomes, we hope, is going to be an encyclopedia of techniques and morphologies that solve specific problems of cities.





**MF:** The problems we encounter are usually about health and education. It started with the idea of food deserts in Chicago, since we realized that many people in Chicago simply don't have access to healthy food.

*Each of you takes teaching seriously. How do you connect practice and teaching?*

**RS:** cityLAB is affiliated with UCLA. We employ six or seven students all the time. And we teach design and planning classes where students are exposed to urban projects in a multidisciplinary way. They solve more than just a straightforward architectural problem.

**MF:** Our students come from different disciplines: journalism, music, law. Oftentimes the studio work is very entrepreneurial, and students will continue with the projects after Archeworks. They form a spin-off or a franchise.

**SARAH DUNN:** They are two alternate methods of practicing. At Urban Lab, our design practice, we very much believe in the master plan, whereas Archeworks is bottom up and incremental. We both teach, too, so we have the typical education set-up, along with the Archeworks alternative model.

**DC:** At UCLA, our model is to give students a clear set of parameters with a very discipline-specific approach. We take one of those very clear strands and apply it to an urban point of view. We don't think that everybody needs to do their own thing or that we need to train people from all kinds of disciplines. Instead, if we bring people in from other disciplines, they will have a clear view if we know what we, as architects, are doing.

**RS:** In school studios, there are often two alternatives: to adopt a critical project or the community outreach project. Those people are not about form. To us, that's a false distinction that we'd like to debunk right here. We're very interested not only in architecture, but about form. We're attempting to be projective without being utopian. We're interested in moving the discourse of architecture forward, but we believe that the way forward has to be driven by changes in the economics and politics of the city. They are the agents that move architecture forward with the outcome of the avant-garde.

*You mention the avant-garde. How does it exist today?*

**RS:** The avant-garde today is a kind of rear-guard definition of the historical avant-garde. If architects work in a design sphere alone, we revert to that old model of the avant-garde. The interdisciplinarity present in the sciences or in new economic models would be a form of forcing architecture forward into a new kind of avant-gardism. When you talk about Wall Street people, for example, however hated they are, you realize they have tapped into an enormous amount of energy and creativity that's been ignored by architects, which would allow us to break into new kinds of practice. Business plans in other fields are as innovative as anything we would ever do.

*If the avant-garde is a practice, then where does that leave form and aesthetics?*

**MS:** One thing, no offense, what the magazines seem to consider the avant-garde these days lacks any sense of insubordination—unlike the historic avant-garde, which was a critique of capitalism. People who equate today's avant-garde with form

are just the icing on the capitalist cake. This is why I would insist there is a difference between scientific creativity and the creativity of the Wall Street types, which is completely decoupled from an ethical position. I would also draw a distinction between the specific forms of buildings in an artistic sense and the performative aspects of building. My academic program is deliberately progressive in its political orientation. The shape of a building is clearly trivial.

*So is sustainability avant-gardist?*

**DC:** This is now the most productive kind of avant-garde. We have seen the most coherent, utopian thinking today happening in the realm of sustainability. We need to be rethinking how green operates, not just as a series of checklists or as branding, but as a real transformation of a way of thinking about architecture and the city.

**MS:** One of the things that this green thing enables is to provide the students with real analytical quantification. When I was going through architecture school, there were numbers, but they were total bullshit, mock social-scientific numbers. The neighborhood unit will have 11 parking places, one kindergarten, as an example. But this is just pulled out of a hat. Now we know a lot about how buildings and cities perform, in terms of hard data.

**DC:** So we need to merge the avant-garde with the environmental movement. Instead of being morally good and having that patina washed over it—the wood, earth model—it could actually be hip and cool at the same time. We tell students: Well-rounded work that is forward-thinking acquires an avant-garde status. When you have a project on the shelf, you always

