

DESIGN

MOVING



THE

GOALPOST

SUPER BOWL CHAMPION **MICHAEL BENNETT**
FINDS SUCCESS — AND INSPIRES CHANGE —
IN A WHOLE NEW FIELD

INTERVIEW BY
ERIC MUTRIE



Studio Kër's 2024 exhibition "We Gotta Get Back to the Crib" (presented by Marta gallery at the Rebuild Foundation's 6 Flat in Chicago) showcased fresh takes on the African design diaspora. Cape Mantle (top) and Pews (bottom) reference elements of Black home and church life, respectively, while Gumbo (right) pairs a fibreglass lounge chair with an anthropomorphic cushion.

IN 2014, FIVE YEARS INTO HIS NFL CAREER, defensive lineman Michael Bennett became a Super Bowl XLVIII champion playing for the Seattle Seahawks. For most athletes, such an accomplishment is already a remarkable professional legacy. But Bennett's on-field aptitude (he's also a three-time Pro Bowler) stands secondary to his ongoing humanitarian work and social justice activism. In 2015, he used a press conference to speak out against a teammate's criticism of the Black Lives Matter movement. The following year, he joined fellow NFL player Colin Kaepernick by refusing to stand during "The Star-Spangled Banner" — a form of protest against police brutality and systemic racism that Bennett (then playing for the Philadelphia Eagles) continued after Kaepernick left the league. (Pushback led to a viral fake photo of Bennett burning the American flag.) In both his memoir — *Things That Make White People Uncomfortable*, published in 2018 — and the podcast *Mouthpeace*, which he hosts alongside his wife, artist Pele Bennett, he has tackled everything from concussions to over-policing. The couple also leads a food justice foundation dedicated to promoting nutrition in underserved communities.

But it turns out that all these achievements have just been the first few chapters of a much longer playbook. Since retiring from the NFL in 2020, Bennett has embarked on another career entirely: designer. After graduating from the Heritage School of Interior Design, he enrolled in an architecture degree at the University of Hawai'i in Honolulu, where he lives. He also established a design practice, Studio Kër, initially working alongside industrial designer Imhotep Blot, who passed away in 2023. In January 2024, Bennett unveiled his first collection in an exhibition entitled "We Gotta Get Back to the Crib." And during last December's edition of Miami Art Week, he debuted an amber glass vessel as part of a series of limited-edition works by a roster of five designers commissioned by Lexus and showcased at both Alcova Miami and the Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami.

On a panel that Lexus held at the ICA Miami to mark the launch, architect Germane Barnes (who also contributed to the capsule collection) praised Bennett's unique combination of star power and integrity. "You can't miss him — he towers over everyone else.

And he's always going to come up and give you a great big hug every time he sees you," he said. "It takes a lot of effort to be hopeful and joyful, and Michael always starts with that. I hope that architecture and design doesn't make him jaded and that his spark stays with him, because he is a deeply caring person." In conversation with Bennett, that becomes immediately evident. Here, he talks us through the kickoff of his new career — and how it continues his ongoing mission.

Let's start with the obvious: Football to furniture is not a conventional path. At what point did you decide that design would be your next big move?

I've always liked design. Growing up, my brother would say that I had good taste in clothes. And I still see a lot of design in athletics — there is an artistry required to play football, in terms of the architecture of the body and being able to manoeuvre it while still taking care of it. It's like a structure in itself. There's also the fact that, I know I'm not overweight, but every time I get into a chair, it breaks. The last time I was in Japan, I broke, like, three chairs. I think about the body a lot — especially the Black body, in terms of the scale and the spaces it manoeuvres through. Moving into design professionally was also motivated by my activism. After retiring from football, I was reading a lot about Booker T. Washington, who spent the late 19th

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century thinking about rebuilding America for the Black community. That's when I started to think about design as an act of resistance. How can we change the world? It starts with design.

You've described your work with Studio Kër as designed in "joyous opposition to the dominance of Western domestic typologies." What does that mean to you?

There's this idea that Black creativity can only come through Black pain. When I go to art exhibits, it's clear that a lot of the world wants to see Black art as, "Oh, this is what police brutality did to you." And I think there's a space for that, but it's not my space. My space is asking, "What does it feel like to grow up in a family of love? What does it feel like to have Black joy?"

Your designs reference elements of the African diaspora, and your studio takes its name from the Wolof word *kër*, which means "home" in Senegal, where your ancestors are from. Growing up in Louisiana, were you already deeply familiar with that cultural heritage, or did those references come out of research?

It's both. I pull from the religious culture of my family, and the sacred parts of growing up in the Black church in Louisiana. But the research is constant, to learn more about myself and my culture. The first time I went to Senegal, I found that it looked a lot like Louisiana — a lot of the culture was the same. Everybody in America is a descendant of somewhere else — all of us are naturalized to America, but we also have something that's pulling us back to the past. And that's what Senegal did for me — it pulled me back. As I have found out more about the history of architecture and making and materiality there, it has become this kind of bridge to the swag of being African American.

You initially partnered with Imhotep Blot, an industrial designer who passed away in early 2023. I'm so sorry for your loss. What was your dynamic with him like?

We were two people who both came from the African diaspora — me from Senegal, and him from Haiti — and who care about design and culture. There was a significant communion in the way we think about the connection between past and present through these objects that we want to live into the future. And Imhotep worked at a really dope pace. Industrial design is different from architecture, but at the same time, there are a lot of principles that stay the same. He passed away before Studio Kër could present our first collection, but that show was presented in memory of him.



Ursa Minor, a plant-based polymer lamp designed for San Francisco lighting company Gantri, pays homage to the Little Dipper — specifically, the constellation's role in guiding people through darkness to freedom.

You debuted that exhibition, "We Gotta Get Back to the Crib," in January 2024. How did you choose that title?

The collection focused on the essence of Blackness — getting back to ideas of culture, home and family. When I'm making something, I want it to be subtle and elegant, but also urgent. What I am trying to articulate through my focus on African forms is that there's this fragmented part in the history of America in that traditions from Africa were broken because of slavery. So it's trying to figure out what's left over from those fragments to build something new. I feel like a lot of times, design these days is just about observing. You just look at something, like, "Oh, that's cool." But when you sit on a chair, does it allow you to have conversations that aren't just about the chair, and are about the world at large?

Building on that, one of the standouts in the collection is the two-part Gumbo chair, which has a fibreglass frame and corresponding body pillow. How did the dish play a role in shaping the piece?

For me, design isn't so much about form leading to function or function leading to form, but narrative leading to form. When gumbo happens, it's a very communal thing — you put everything into a pot and everybody starts to share. When I retired from football, I tried to think about a word that would push me through the rest of my life and how I think moving forward — and that word was "communion." I mean that in the sense of spiritual, physical and mental gathering. That's how I want to see the world, and so everything that I've made has been about communion.

In a way, the larger mix of materials in the show also felt like a gumbo — having all these things together and allowing each of them to have their own flavour, whether that's the earthiness of stone or the warmth of wood. One of the woods that I used is African sapele wood, and I liked that it's African, but also, my wife's name is Pele, and she's like a muse to me. She's a very beautiful, intelligent individual.

The exhibition was held at the Rebuild Foundation, founded by Theaster Gates. What was it like to show there?

Theaster Gates is one of my good friends, and I like thinking about the way that he is putting things into the perspective that they were always supposed to be seen through. He looks at space in terms of both how it came to be and what it is supposed to be. It takes people plugged into the system to develop the things that they actually want to see in their cities, rather than just having someone else's desires placed upon them. The Rebuild Foundation is pivotal — it speaks to how I see the world and what I want to see exist.

What was reception to the collection like?

It's been a mixed bag. Some people think it's great and other people think that I don't deserve to be in the design world. But you've got to respect losing so that you can love

winning. It's not about fame for me; I already had that. Instead, it's about finding ways to make an impact. I'm really focused on trying to bring design and all that it has to offer into the spaces I grew up in, so that people have a better sense of what they can be. If you look at my track record politically, and what I stand for as an individual, I've never been scared to talk about what I'm supposed to be talking about. That's just who I am, so I want to continue inspiring people to change.

You established a scholarship for Black designers at the Heritage School of Interior Design, and you and Pele have also set up a \$250,000 endowed fund to get more people of colour into the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD). What drove those philanthropy decisions?

Again, it's about systems. RISD is one of the most important design schools, so it makes sense to create more opportunities for people to get skills from there to change their existing communities. When I started playing college football for Texas A&M, I went from seeing nothing but Black and Mexican people to only seeing white people. I became a minority super-fast, and it felt like nothing I did was appropriate. They didn't like the way I dressed; there was a coach telling me to pull my pants up. And then I realized, I can't do that. He's basically taking away what makes me *me*. I think the more diversity that we allow into those communities, the more that we'll continue to improve them.

And I think that people are hungry to learn and acquire these skill sets. When I was in Haiti a couple years back, the kids walked 10 miles to school every day. One of them had actually died trying to cross the river in the middle, so the other kids and their families had worked to get a bridge made. Nothing — not even the death of their friend — had kept those kids from getting an education and reaching their potential. It was similar in Senegal. I spent a lot of time working with girls there, and I asked them what they wanted to be. This one girl said that she wanted to become an engineer to devise a better system for ambulances, because her grandmother had died when they couldn't get an ambulance.

School gives people tools to make better worlds. That's why I make donations and give my time to these things — because I know the importance of creating an army of thinkers that build a new system. It's not just about doing the work, but about creating the space for others to do the work. Humans deserve to live in a place with clean water, education, nice parks, access to books — and seeing how people, when they have those opportunities, really rise to the occasion shows me that everyone just wants to exist in a world that's fair and righteous.

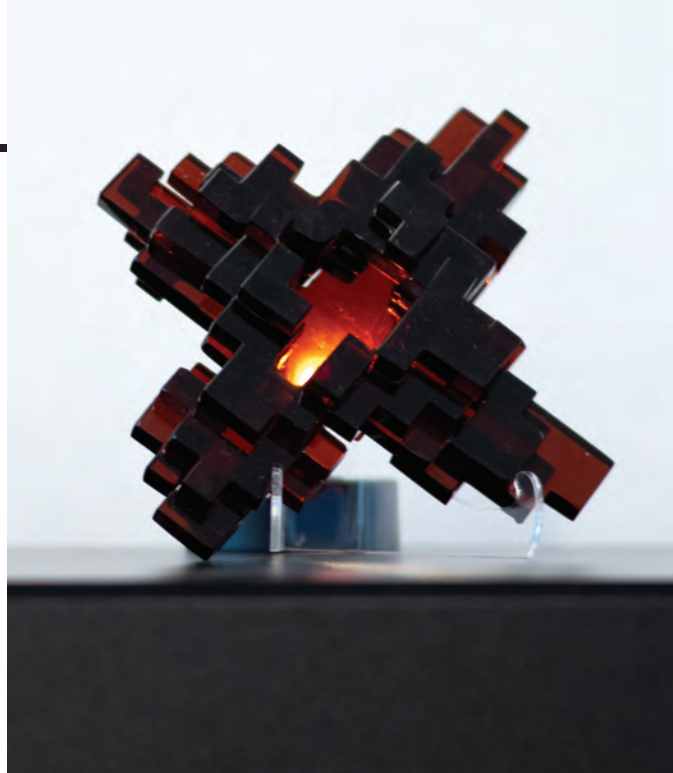
WHEN YOU SIT ON A CHAIR, DOES IT ALLOW YOU TO HAVE CONVERSATIONS ABOUT THE WORLD AT LARGE?

What has your own experience in education at the University of Hawai'i been like?

It has re-energized me to be around so many young minds. I want to be humble. I know that discipline is important, because I grew up going to practice every single day. I did have to stay up until four in the morning making things. Collaboration and teamwork are also things that were already part of my skill set. I realized that no one thing is designed by just a single person — everything takes a group effort.

You created a limited-edition vessel as part of the Lexus in Design series, which also featured objects by Crafting Plastics, Germane Barnes, Suchi Reddy, and Tara Sakhi (T Sakhi), and a candle by fragrance brand Dilo. Tell me about the concept behind your design.

In America, we talk about the idea of 10,000 hours — but Lexus is built on the idea of the Japanese *takumi* master craftsman, who spends 60,000 hours devoted to their craft. In Japan, after 10,000 hours, you ain't even gone pro yet. Having spent a lot of time there, that's



Bennett's amber glass vessel, part of a limited-edition Lexus capsule collection presented in Miami this past December, frames a candle to cast a sacred glow.

something I've always loved about Japan — everything has an elegance to it, even if it's just the towel folded in your room each night. There's a meditative rhythm to that repetition. I set out to capture that in a vessel made of amber glass, which became a way to reflect candle flames on a table. I think a lot about ritual: Candles are usually in a sacred space, or to try to set a mood, so I wanted something that would heighten that.

What's next?

I'm working on several projects right now — a chapel in Seattle and two houses. I've also launched a program, Building Motions, that is about bringing art into sanctuary-type secular spaces within communities of colour, and the first edition of that will be in 2025. All of it takes a lot of time — it's getting kind of hard to sleep sometimes.

When it comes to your furniture designs, have any of your old football teammates reached out to buy anything?

Romeo Okwara, Malcolm Jenkins and Quinton Jefferson have all bought pieces. A lot of my former teammates — and some people I didn't even play with — have hit me up. *[Laughs.]* It's interesting, because I hate the way that everybody in the NFL dresses, so it's about time they got some style. I think people are always surprised that I've been in these two different worlds. Even when I was in Miami for the Lexus in Design launch, some of the other people in the program were asking, "Why do people keep taking pictures with you?" and I had to explain to them, "Oh, I used to play football." I need to embrace both sides, because it shows other people that they're not stuck in something, and are able to change if they want to change. I'm 39, and I think a lot of times, people are scared to enter the creative space later on, but some people's greatest work happened after 50. **AZ**



PUBLIC HEALTH

DOCTOR'S ORDERS

BY PRESCRIBING HOUSING FOR THE CHRONICALLY UNHOUSED, A HOSPITAL-LED SOCIAL MEDICINE INITIATIVE IS PROVIDING NEW HOPE IN TORONTO — WITH HELP FROM ARCHITECTS LOCAL AND INTERNATIONAL



Andrew Boozary
physician and executive director, UHN Gattuso Centre for Social Medicine



Daniel Ling and Kevin Hutchinson
principals, Montgomery Sisam



Paul Karakusevic
principal, Karakusevic Carson Architects

INTERVIEW BY
SIMON LEWSEN

IN JUNE OF 2021, the University Health Network — a consortium of hospitals in downtown Toronto — announced that it was doing something health organizations rarely do: building homes for high-needs patients. Last October, the UHN, in partnership with the United Way Greater Toronto, opened Dunn House, a complex of 51 single-occupancy units financed by various levels of government, operated by the charity Fred Victor and sited on a hospital-owned parking lot in the city's Parkdale neighbourhood. The units are being offered on a rent-geared-to-income basis, and the building itself was designed by Montgomery Sisam Architects, a blue chip firm that has been carving out a niche in supportive housing for unhoused people. (Full disclosure: MSA is working on the expansion of Innis College at the University of Toronto, where I teach. It also designed the home I grew up in.)

But UHN isn't done. Last summer, the network announced a fellowship whereby renowned architects and advocates would develop solutions to the city's housing crisis. I recently spoke about these initiatives with Andrew Boozary, a physician and the executive director of UHN's Gattuso Centre for Social Medicine; Daniel Ling and Kevin Hutchinson, both principals at MSA; and Paul Karakusevic, one of the inaugural Social Medicine Housing Fellows, whose U.K. firm, Karakusevic Carson Architects, has designed public housing complexes for both London and Toronto.

Andrew, in an op-ed for the *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, you mention that Canadian hospitals — in Guelph and Edmonton, and now Toronto — have been building housing. Why?

ANDREW BOOZARY: What else would you have health workers do? The housing crisis is a health crisis. People who are chronically unhoused live half as long as others. When a patient's major concern is where they're going to sleep at night, it's hard for them to follow a medication regimen. With chronic conditions like cardiovascular disease or diabetes, tragic outcomes — from amputations to heart attacks to strokes — are far too common. People who are unhoused are in hospital two to three times longer than other patients. There's a revolving door of people coming in and out of emergency departments because they have nowhere else to go. Our downtown hospitals are at 105 to 120 per cent occupancy. And there's no pathway for humane discharge.

I guess, for hospital workers, the alternative to building housing is simply living with the moral distress of discharging people onto the streets, which runs contrary to the rehabilitative mission of healthcare. There's also the issue of money, though. At a certain point, when you have individuals constantly returning to the ER, is it actually cheaper to build housing for them?

AB: It costs the system over \$30,000 a month when an individual is admitted to any downtown hospital. It's around \$13,000 a month in the prison system, which has become the de facto mental health system. People ask, "Can you afford Dunn House?" My answer is, "We can't afford the status quo." But the issue is not just one of health economics. It's one of life expectancy. If there was a drug that could stop people from losing 20 to 30 years, you'd hope that every policy-maker, funder and investor would be racing to pay for it.

Dunn House has single-occupancy units for 51 people. How did you decide who gets to live there?

AB: Using hospital data, we identified individuals who have high medical risks, high numbers of total visits to the ER or high numbers of days in a hospital bed. We also looked at how long people have been unhoused. There's no perfect algorithm. What's unique about Dunn House, though, is that it's a permanent solution. It's not transitional housing where, after 60 days, people are discharged onto the street.

Dunn House was created via modular construction. Daniel and Kevin, can you explain that process?

DANIEL LING: With modular construction, you're building whole boxes — with interiors, windows and most of the cladding — off site in a factory. You then bring the boxes, almost fully complete, to the construction site for assembly. Dunn House has identical 275-square-foot studio units. Buildings like that, with lots of repetition, are best suited for modular construction.

The big advantage is that modular construction is fast, right?

DL: It has two advantages. One is speed. You can do much of the on-site and factory work in parallel. The final assembly, then, might be completed within weeks. When modular construction goes smoothly, we can get an entire building done in nine to 12 months, as opposed to 20 months. The second advantage is the lower carbon footprint. Factory fabrication reduces waste, particularly when it comes to transport. You're only trucking the final product to site, not the other materials.

KEVIN HUTCHINSON: We have a diminishing workforce available to us. We're seeing smaller construction crews on sites in general. With modular construction, you can find workforce efficiencies. For example, if you're installing plumbing in a washroom on site, you're on a ladder up in the ceiling. But in a factory, you're lifted on dollies, so you're sitting in a chair comfortably working at chest height. A factory setting is more attractive to the labour force. It's a more climate-controlled, technologically enhanced environment.

In modular design, repetition is a virtue. But, presumably, you still want some degree of variation in the architecture. How do you achieve that?

DL: In the Durham Modular Transitional Housing project [a suite of modular homes for unhoused people in the town of Beaverton, Ontario], we had 47 units and three storeys. For much of the building, we leaned into the repetition. In the middle, though, there's a cut-out where we used two shorter modules, creating a forecourt for the entry. We weren't doing anything complex. We were just saying, "Let's put a bunch of shorter units here to create a cut-out. And let's line the inside of the cut-out with wood to have a contrast to the dark siding." To create a community hub, we put a smaller building in the front of the residential section, and we gave that building a distinctive roof shape. We were being selective. We were allowing repetition, but also introducing moments of variety to create contrast.

KH: At Dunn House, the length of the building is shorter than at Durham. So naturally, we have less repetition. And the repetition we do have is quite nice.

Tell me about the healthcare amenities at Dunn House.

AB: Each individual has their own bed and bathroom. The building is pet-inclusive. And there are embedded healthcare supports that have not been standard for supportive housing. As a physician, I'm at Dunn House every Monday, offering primary care. There are also community health workers and caseworkers. A colleague of mine, Vicky Stergiopoulos, has a weekly clinic addressing mental health needs. And we have access to the UHN virtual emergency department.

In addition to Dunn House, the UHN has created a housing fellowship. What questions are the fellows looking to answer?

AB: One is “Where are the opportunities to scale up? How can we make the model more accessible, so that cities customize it for their own patient populations or neighbourhoods?” It’s important to build up a cadre of design and architecture expertise. The second question is “What should housing look like for people who have high health needs, high degrees of social deprivation, and mistrust of the health system?”

Would you like to see a future in which housing is understood as a core part of a hospital’s mandate?

AB: Yes and no. I would love to not have the housing crisis being managed through the emergency department. And I would like to see both the public and private sectors do the work of delivering housing. At the UHN, we don’t want to engage in hospital overreach. We want to see more collaboration. We prefer to work with other institutions as partners rather than taking on housing ourselves.

Paul, in your professional experience, what are the best practices for building social housing?

PAUL KARAKUSEVIC: At our firm, we’re trying to make housing that is dignified and durable, where people can live their best lives. We have to do that on a budget that’s two-thirds of the private sector’s budget. That’s where having a good pencil and a good drawing hand is useful. We can’t make things that are flamboyant, but we can make things that are beautiful, elegant and built to last hundreds of years.

You’re alluding to a tension between economics and aesthetics. You don’t want to design buildings that look cheap. But you do need to be thrifty, right?

PK: We try to make the plans of the building simple, and we try to think about the experience of residents. Everyone should feel dignified, safe and secure, warm in winter and not too hot in summer. Materiality is key. Georgian buildings from 300 years ago are still standing. There’s no reason why the new housing we’re building shouldn’t be standing in 300-plus years.

But how do you do this kind of work economically?

PK: In London, we’ve gotten value for money by giving the public sector the support they need to manage the process all the way through. In the past 20 to 30 years, a lot of the public sector has been de-skilled, and it has not had the capability to manage projects. Instead, it has brought on private-sector partners — who want a big piece of the pie — at an early stage in the project. If the public sector manages projects themselves, they don’t have to scrimp later on materials or process specifications.

Your firm also thinks carefully about using floor plates to maximize the number of dwellings.

PK: Yes, because land is finite. We have to make the most with what we have, which means working hard to come up with intelligent spatial planning.

KH: In order to get more value out of sites, you have to

break rules. For some sites, you need to under-provide on setbacks and maybe have a different building configuration. In Montgomery Sisam’s forthcoming Kensington Market project [a suite of supportive modular housing units on a parking lot in a storied Toronto neighbourhood], we have an L-shaped courtyard building with two narrow edges toward the street, instead of a traditional street wall. Zoning would have hated that, right? But we were able to achieve a great number of additional units because of an atypical built form.

PK: When we began working with Toronto, we started by asking planners about their favourite cities and streets around the world. As it turns out, those very cities and streets broke a lot of the planning rules in Toronto. I understand that, in Toronto, you have a different climate, so I see the need for zoning and coding. But these measures kill creativity. If you have too much blanket zoning, it can lead to dull cities and lost opportunities. When Dunn House was being designed, somebody could have drawn a big rectangle around the property and said, “This is hospital land. And it can only be hospital land.” Well, actually, there’s a parking lot there. It’s underutilized land in the middle of a housing crisis. So let’s negotiate around the rules. I like this tension. It leads to interesting cities that evolve quickly.

WHAT’S UNIQUE ABOUT DUNN HOUSE IS THAT IT’S A PERMANENT SOLUTION. IT’S NOT TRANSITIONAL HOUSING WHERE, AFTER 60 DAYS, PEOPLE ARE DISCHARGED ONTO THE STREET.

On the topic of speed, let’s talk about the “rapid” part of “rapid housing.” How do we build houses faster?

PK: I’m not bashing planners, but the approvals process can be bureaucratic. When you’re dealing with public or City land, the sign-off process for contracts and tenders can be slow. We can all design faster than planners can plan.

KH: The City of Toronto has been evolving its approach. The new “city-builder” process [a program by which the City steps in to develop affordable housing] is interesting, because it has taken rezoning out of the equation. A lot of the engineering reports that require time to prepare, review and revise are now no longer needed at the rezoning stage and are downloaded to the site plan application process instead.

There’s a prevailing sense, particularly in North America, that architecture is an elite indulgence. Make the case to me that housing for unhoused people is actually a job for architects.

PK: A lot of the modern housing from the ’60s and ’70s was builder- and engineer-led, as opposed to architect-led. First, you had the original Unité d’habitation [a classic residential housing typology designed by Swiss French architect Le Corbusier]. But then, around the world, the construction lobby went, “Wow, we can make a lot of money by imitating — badly — Le Corbusier’s high-density mass-housing ideas while editing out all the design qualities.” So all of Le Corbusier’s generosity gets stripped out, not by architects but by the construction industry. Decades later, the buildings get torn down. And who do we all blame? Architects!

This time around, the work has to be architect-led, with a focus on quality. Often I say, “Build a bit less, but make it good.” That way, when people see new buildings, they go, “Wow, new can be great.” I worry that, if there’s a rush for numbers, the architects will get squeezed, the industry will take over and we’ll end up repeating the mistakes of the ’60s and ’70s, which would be tragic. Tearing down buildings that are only 40 or 50 years old is the definition of insanity.

DL: Charles and Ray Eames aimed, according to their motto, “to make the best for the most for the least,” meaning the best design for the most people for the least cost. If we can take this same attitude when delivering housing, we have a shot at making a real difference as designers and city-builders. **AZ**

IN MUMBAI, THE DHARAVI KOLIWADA — AND LOCAL PRACTICE **URBZ** — ARE CO-CREATING A RADICALLY GRASSROOTS AND “USER-GENERATED” MODEL OF DEVELOPMENT

CITY-BUILDING

HOMEGROWN



URBANISM

INTERVIEW BY
STEFAN NOVAKOVIC

WEEKS AHEAD OF OUR CALL, I try to bridge the 12,000-kilometre distance and learn as much as possible yet keep an open mind. The Internet makes it hard. When I Google “Dharavi,” autocomplete immediately adds “slum” — a word that appears 11 times on the first page, even though I reject the addition. Maybe I shouldn’t be surprised. After all, the Mumbai district is among the world’s largest unplanned settlements, with an estimated million residents. While the scale is almost unprecedented, the density is broken up into surprisingly intimate milieux and intricate hyper-local economies.

LEFT: The ambitious water sanitation project employs a network of shallow trenches to supply the Koliwada with clean, reliable water, protecting the neighbourhood from demolition.

Dharavi's oldest neighbourhood is a case in point. Built as a fishing village by the region's Indigenous Koli people centuries before Portuguese colonialism, the Dharavi Koliwada remains home to nearly 700 households — including some 370 Koli families — as well as Urbz, an interdisciplinary practice founded in the Koliwada in 2008. The studio operates at the intersection of public governance and community engagement, mediating between communities and the bureaucracies of planning and design. In India, the gaps can be particularly stark, leaving little room for local, grassroots urbanism amid top-down waves of demolition and redevelopment.

Dharavi risks following the same pattern. In January, the local government approved the first phase of a US\$3 billion developer project slated to transform 240 hectares. Since 2008, however, Urbz and Koliwada residents have gradually nurtured a radically different praxis, hosting community conversations exploring “user-centric” urbanism. In 2023, their ambitions took a step forward via a grant from the Re:arc Institute, a Copenhagen-based architectural non-profit that supports grassroots solutions for culturally and ecologically sustainable development. In the Dharavi Koliwada, their funding is facilitating the village's evolution, which ranges from a co-working and study space to new street lighting and sanitation infrastructure — projects facilitated by Urbz partners Kareena Kochery and Samidha Patil, who joined me via Zoom in late 2024.

I can hear the busy din of evening traffic behind you. Tell me about Dharavi and the Koliwada.

KAREENA KOCHERY: The Koliwada was the seed around which Dharavi grew. It's existed for centuries, and in a way, both the village and the larger community predate Mumbai as we know it. At the same time, it's a place deeply shaped by its colonial past, when industries and activities that were considered polluting or “unclean” were pushed out of the fortified city, which forced a lot of artisanal communities — like Chamar leather-workers — to relocate here.

Dharavi has a long history as a refuge for historically marginalized communities.

The area was primarily marshlands, and much of Dharavi was built out organically on reclaimed land, with the community's discarded waste and refuse eventually anchored by the mangrove roots growing around it, creating a solid base for construction — and building techniques still used to this day emerged from this landscape. Yet it's still thought of as a “slum,” and one famously described as the largest in the world.

SAMIDHA PATIL: The government and the urban planning regulations formally categorized it as a slum until 2014. After years of community protest and activism, they finally removed the tag. But changing the perception is a different challenge.



Urbz partners Samidha Patil (left) and Kareena Kochery are leading efforts to foster community-driven urban change in Dharavi.

When a community is branded a slum, it becomes easy to erase the complexity of its history, culture and economy, and ultimately to demolish and redevelop it all. Hopefully that attitude is changing, but it presents a new type of challenge: How does an unplanned community meet regulatory bureaucracy and modern urban planning?

SP: It's a challenge. Kareena and I both trained as architects, and we were both disillusioned by it — which I think is ultimately how both of us ended up at Urbz. My background was actually working for the companies engaged in so-called “slum redevelopment.” It quickly became apparent to me that what we were building didn't reflect community needs. For starters, the small apartments weren't livable for the average Indian family of five. It falls under the umbrella of real estate development, rather than thinking of housing as a community need that exists as part of a social entity.

KK: I was also let down with the limitations of architectural practice. When I did my master's, I decided to focus on landscape architecture instead, which opened me up to the field of

cultural geography and a broader way of understanding our built environments. We don't use the word “slum”; we call it a homegrown neighbourhood. But Samidha's perspective is really distinct. Her family is Koli, although from a different village — and her parents and grandparents experienced eviction. They were displaced from their home.

That must've been awful, Samidha. Is it something you're comfortable talking about?

SP: Well, it happened before I was born, when my mother was in her teens. But what I know is that it was a huge shift. We were a fishing community highly dependent on water, and it was a way of life that also necessitated access to boat storage and fishing equipment. In the off-season, the same spaces were then

used for drying fish, as well as boat repair and maintenance. And these liminal spaces — the semi-public “verandas” between houses — were cultural spaces as well: They were sites of festivities and celebrations.

That all disappeared. When my family was moved into an apartment, there was an immediate space crunch, and a loss of cultural and economic livelihood. And you can trace that loss to the change of typology from a small hut to an apartment building. This happened to a lot of people. For example, some fishing communities moved into the distillation of alcohol — at the time considered a major taboo — which pushed them further into stigma and poverty, while networks of vernacular artisanal education also disappeared. But the Dharavi Koliwada is still here, and even though most people are no longer employed as fishermen (many now work in construction and building trades), the community connections remain.

Modernist planning doctrine imagines a divide between public and private space, but you've



Engagement with neighbours and community members is key to Urbz's philosophy — and aided by legible drawings and models.

described a much more fluid spectrum of activity. It requires a different type of vocabulary.

KK: To this day, that type of distinction between public and private space doesn't really exist in Dharavi, and particularly in the Koliwada. People are getting haircuts in the street, cleaning rice, all sorts of activities that might otherwise be deemed to belong to the "private" realm. In many planned neighbourhoods, however, public life is largely limited to leisure — to recreation and maybe shopping.

It's rare to talk to practitioners so directly embedded in their communities. How does this translate into your work in the Koliwada?

SP: It feels quite natural at this point, because we've been here for 15 years. The community is organized by a self-governing local body, the Koli Jamat Trust, and they've already come up with ideas for projects to improve local life. We've been working closely with the Koli Jamat to co-design and build small-scale individual building projects, like the redevelopment of the Koli Jamat Hall [a four-storey community hub combining offices for local leaders with a dedicated space for events, meetings and celebration, as well as ground-floor restaurants and shops]. Right now, one of the biggest priorities is to rethink the water sanitation network for the whole of the Koliwada — a long-standing

initiative that started before we received support from Re:arc.

The government never provided public water infrastructure for the village, so people ended up doing it for themselves in an ad hoc way. Basically, they'd build their own pipelines and connect them to the public water main that runs closest to the village. It more or less worked for a while. Now, as the village grows in population and gets busier and demand for water increases, there are too many pipelines — some get barely a trickle. And wherever there's a leakage, it increases the risk for contamination and threatens public health. So there's a need to rethink the whole system. At the same time, installing a conventional public sanitation project would more or less entail demolishing the entire village.

It's a really striking example of the impasse between state power — and its expression through urban planning — and the community. It's presented as a seeming binary: Either the village is preserved but perpetual problems with sanitation remain, or it's demolished in exchange for clean water. How do you find a middle ground?



Artisan Abbas Galwani (top) is working with Urbz to revitalize a colonial building as a community hub, complete with a traditional pot tile roof.

KK: This is the core of our mission at Urbz. We see ourselves as bridging the gap between architecture and planning and community agency. And we try to be cognizant of that in everything we do. Fortunately, there are alternatives to a top-down way of doing things.

SP: With the water sanitation project, for example, we've looked at case studies around the world — including in Brazil, Pakistan and Japan — implementing shallow water infrastructure in dense urban settings. There are particularly good precedents across Latin America, where infrastructure has been designed and engineered to fit into tight spaces — and where digging deep underground isn't possible.

KK: Across the Koliwada, we undertook a study of all the lanes to understand where the narrowest points are so we can plan out a new water system. We're also working closely with the Koli Jamat to figure out phasing, implementation, and how we can bring the entire community on board. Of course, it's a massive project, and one that we can't undertake by ourselves. With the funding we've received from Re:arc, however, we're committed to building a prototype and then looking at how it can be developed — and we're supporting the Koli Jamat, who are in conversation with municipal authorities to get funding for the project.

Urbz has been a presence in the Dharavi Koliwada for a long time, which obviously helps establish rapport and trust with the community. Beyond a tangible and continued presence, how do you build and maintain community trust?

SP: Oftentimes, we are building on community priorities that already exist, so we listen and learn and work from there. We're consciously not thinking about — or talking about — our work in a traditional planning context. There's



ABOVE: A solar lighting project is illuminating the Koliwada's dark, cramped lanes — while introducing a bold placemaking gesture.

WE SEE OURSELVES AS BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN ARCHITECTURE AND PLANNING AND COMMUNITY AGENCY. AND WE TRY TO BE COGNIZANT OF THAT IN EVERYTHING WE DO.

no “master plan,” because that imposes a top-down way of thinking. We work with the community to identify current needs and future needs. It's development without a formal plan.

Our visual communication style is also very deliberate. The drawings that we produce of our projects don't come from an architectural language of communication — we're trying to remove those layers of abstraction and the sense of distance as a viewer. And our own team is very multidisciplinary. Our co-founders, Rahul Srivastava and Matias Echanove, didn't study architecture, so we try not to operate within that kind of vocabulary. [The Urbz team in Mumbai also includes Bharat Gangurde and Jai Bhadgaonkar.]

KK: Sometimes, when we initiate a project, we find that we haven't earned full trust. For example, when we proposed an improved fish market for the Koliwada — which responds to a need that exists in the community — we hadn't yet done enough work with the Fisher Women's Association to gain their trust. But then a need to create a dedicated study and co-working space for students emerged out of those conversations, so we've started working on that. There's a dilapidated British colonial customs house that was in ruin, and they transferred ownership to the Koli Jamat. So we're working on creating the new study space there.

Tell me about your approach to working within a colonial built context. How do you reimagine a British building for the 21st-century Koliwada?

KK: Thanks to our Re:arc funding, we're collaborating with local artisans to reintroduce

vernacular architecture to the building. We're working with Abbas Galwani, an artisan from the Dharavi Kumbharwada [which was traditionally a Gujarati potters' village] to optimize traditional pot tiles — which are made as pots on a wheel and then cut in half — to fit the building. He's hand-making about 15,000 new tiles.

SP: The roof tiles on the building now were designed by the Portuguese when they colonized this part of the world, and then they were optimized by the British. They even call them Mangalore tiles, so people think they are local. But the pot tiles that we're exploring now are a true local vernacular — and one that supports local artisans.

When I think about the value of traditional architecture, the preservation of heritage and history is what comes to mind. And while that's a valuable goal in itself, this project also situates vernacular within the context of a cultural economy.

KK: Absolutely. And in that sense, a lot of the best projects tend to “emerge” in response to how people live. Re:arc has been really good to work with in this respect, offering a lot of flexibility with their grant funding. In our conversations with community members, lighting for the Koliwada has emerged as another priority, and even though it wasn't part of our initial pitch to Re:arc, it's a project we're fortunate to have support for now.

SP: It's something that community members have been suggesting to us. The lanes are so narrow and tightly packed, so the Koliwada is very dark. You end up with some alleys that are so overbuilt that it feels like an arcade. At the same time, there's a lack of a distinct architectural identity for the neighbourhood, and a real desire to express a sense of place. Lighting is a way to do that.

We recently finished a pilot where we installed some solar-powered lights. And now, with the help of local electricians from the Koliwada and a group of NYU Abu Dhabi engineering students, we're studying ways to place solar panels around the neighbourhood, which is a challenge because space is quite limited.

KK: A remarkable thing about the project is how it was all installed and managed — and ultimately led — by community members. We just facilitated the technology, and people went around figuring out locations that need lights and working with us on how to install them. Things just need a spark. We did a lighting installation, and someone came up to us and said, “This is great. Can you do it in my lane?” And then they take us to their home and tell us about the problem. **AZ**

HERITAGE

MONUMENTS OF MEANING



ARCHITECTS
**ELIAS KHURI AND
AZIZA CHAOUNI**
DISCUSS THE
IMPORTANCE OF
PRESERVING ARAB
HERITAGE SITES
— WHILE ALSO
IMAGINING NEW
POSSIBILITIES

Architect Elias Khuri revived the inner courtyard and semi-ruined eastern section of the Khan of Jaljulia, built between 1312 and 1340. The new structure employs an abstract grid of columns, recovered from the original volumes, that invokes the colonnaded courtyards of Arab mosques.



IN JANUARY 2025, the World Monuments Fund placed “Gaza Historic Urban Fabric, Palestine” on its Watch. The inclusion of the region’s already damaged or imperilled heritage sites — such as Great Omari Mosque, Qasr al-Basha and Souq Al-Qaisariya — was concurrent with the United Nations’ statement that 92 per cent of homes and 69 per cent of all structures in Gaza had been destroyed or damaged during the Israeli military’s bombing campaign over the preceding 15 months, which was triggered by Hamas’s attack on Israel on October 7th, 2023. While it was part of a longer list, one that also included the moon, the WMF’s announcement belatedly put into focus the need to preserve Palestinian architectural identity.

Based in Haifa (with a remote presence in Italy), Palestinian architect Elias Khuri has long worked to restore sites with historic and cultural significance in Arab villages — places including the Khan of al-Wakalah and both the Abul-Awn mosque and the Khan in Jaljulia. At the same time, he has been designing private residences — the remarkable 12 Olive Trees House among them — that propose an ambitious future for Palestinian architecture even under conditions where building anything at all requires great perseverance, as Khuri and Aziza Chaouni discuss in this conversation, which took place over Zoom in January 2025.

An architecture professor at the University of Toronto’s Daniels Faculty of Architecture, Design and Landscape, Chaouni is a renowned practitioner

trained as an engineer who has been at the forefront of many projects in the Global South that take an activist approach to preservation and context-specific new builds. Her works in her home country of Morocco alone include the rehabilitation and reactivation of such mid-century modern treasures as the legendary Sidi Harazem Thermal Bath in Fez (with help from the Getty Foundation), the *ex novo* creation of the Joudour Sahara Cultural Centre in the town of M'hamid El Ghizlane and an anti-seismic earth-brick house prototype, developed after the September 2023 earthquake.

AZIZA CHAOUNI: I want to start by saying that the work you are doing, Elias in rehabilitating and rethinking Palestinian built heritage is extremely important in this very moment, given everything that Gaza has experienced in the past year and a half. Architecture is, in essence, a political act — and we cannot divorce your work from what is currently occurring in the region.

ELIAS KHURI: Thank you very much. Really, for me, it's very hard to speak about architecture. [Long pause.] You know, I feel like it's a kind of crime when I still make architecture, because with architecture, you have to look for beauty. And you feel that you are doing something of a crime when you are seeking beauty with intention in a time of war. Ever since the war began, it has been so hard to concentrate, to make projects. You have to feel like yourself but you cannot. You cannot concentrate. You feel...[in Italian] *muto, che non puoi parlare* ["mute, as if you cannot speak"].

And we need to be able to speak...Also, the problem of our culture and of all our Arab architecture is that we are all fragmented. I can't go to Lebanon, even though it is one hour from me. If you don't know your culture, you can't create an architectural identity. I can't go to Morocco; I can't go to Syria. I met with one friend in Jordan, who studied architecture in Lebanon, and he was telling me, "Elias, you have to go to the villages of Lebanon to learn how to really make architecture," but I can't. I can't make architecture if I don't meet the people and don't know the rest of my architecture. In Palestine, we are fragmented and divided in ethnic villages — since the beginning. When you are divided, you are not entire.

AC: In this context, one cannot help but question if architecture as a discipline can play a relevant role in a crisis like what Palestine or other places experiencing trauma are encountering.

In the early fall of 2023, I started to teach a seminar on heritage preservation entitled Design for the 99%, in collaboration with Riwaq [a Palestinian not-for-profit that documents and preserves architectural heritage]. We were working on small ruins outside of Jerusalem. After October 7, I couldn't get in touch with Riwaq for some time. When I was finally able to reach our collaborators there, they were in distress — but they urged us to continue the exercise. Students reached out to the Palestinian diaspora in Canada and abroad to better comprehend and discuss the challenges



LEFT: An illustration of 12 Olive Trees House shows how the architecture was orchestrated to protect the trees and showcase them throughout the home.

BELOW: The Khan al-Wakalah was built in the early 17th century out of local Nablus stone. After its restoration, Elias Khuri and Davide Pagliarini were brought on to design the courtyard, paving and new openings; they used readily available Carrara marble for the public furniture.



facing the site and its potential futures. The Riwaq team was present during the final review online and it was a very emotional, touching moment. It was a profound lesson for us all: Even in the darkest of times, we architects can play a humble role.

EK: I'm *d'accordo* ["in agreement"] with how they told you to continue. What I understand, what is clear in this period, is that there is nothing clear. This time that we are living through is full of so many radical changes that we don't know how things will go ahead. But for me, the young students are the best future. They are so different and so clever. The Palestinian people, they know how to move, how to use technology, the media. This whole time, we thought the West would help us, but in the end, we have to help ourselves. So I think we have to fight with small things. For me, I don't know how to fight except to do architecture and to protect our identity. And not just to protect our identity: When I made the 12 Olive Trees House, I wanted to protect the landscape and the olive trees because there are few left. They were either stolen or they disappeared because we don't have lands.



ABOVE: Khuri's design for his brother's house makes the indoor-outdoor patio a main organizing feature.

WHAT INTERESTS ME IN MY WORK IS TO BUILD BRIDGES — ACROSS THE ARAB WORLD AND TO STUDENTS, OUR FUTURE.

AC: I agree with you about the importance of education. I would like to share with you the al Mashrou' website, which is the result of research led by architecture students in a course I taught with the historian Jens Hanssen in 2022. The course focused on al Mashrou', an agrarian utopian village that was developed by Musa Alami, the head of the Arab Development Society in the 1950s and 1960s. The village was visionary in many respects: It aimed at being autonomous in food production, water, energy, education, et cetera...It laid out and tested sustainable design principles beyond the time! This little-known project echoes other utopian rural developments that emerged during the same era around the globe. Hence, documenting what remains of al-Mashrou' and understanding its legacy can help broaden our architectural discourse and pedagogy.

EK: Yes. What interests me in my work is really to build bridges — bridges between architects and also between the Arab world. And especially students. What amazed me was the effect that the 12 Olive Trees House had on students. They felt a true affinity for this architecture because, finally, there was someone speaking of their identity. And it gave them hope that you can still do architecture, and you can build your identity on the site, and you can protect it. And then, also in Jordan, winning first place in the Arab Architects Awards in 2022 gave me the opportunity to meet colleagues from the Arab world. It was really important to dialogue with them.

In Palestine, all the middle-class people live in the 48 [the borders that established the State of Israel in 1948]. My parents, all the agricultural people and the poor people are instead tied to the land. So with architecture, it's harder when you have a fragmented society and you don't have people with

a level of appreciation for architecture. And on the other side, you don't have the state [support] to make public buildings. I don't have public buildings. The Khan of Jaljulia — usually, we don't have this kind of project to preserve in Israel. We didn't have the money to build it. When they held the competition bid for contractors, nobody came forward because the amount of money to restore the building was nothing. So the municipality told one of the contractors who wanted to do the streets in the village, "If you also make this project for us, I will hire you to make the streets of the village." So the contractor who carried out the work was specialized in general streetwork for the municipality — not in renovation.

AC: That's funny.

EK: I make very simple things — very poor, very modest projects — just to give life, to adapt my project to the situation. The works are characterized by simplicity and economy, and implemented at low costs; they reduce waste and re-employ the resources available on the site.

The client, or municipality, had seen the Khan al-Wakalah in Nablus; that's why they called me to make this project. And the Khan al-Wakalah began from a project I did for Riwaq, a competition for Birzeit, a long time ago. I won the competition with Davide Pagliarini, my colleague from Italy, but they didn't have the money to do it. And in the competition jury was Giovanni Fontana Antonelli, the head of UNESCO's office for Palestine. He saw my project, and for him it was such a different kind of thinking about architecture. Ten years passed, and then we met by chance, and he said, "I have this project in Nablus..."

AC: Few know the difficulty of building in Palestine. To move one bucket of cement, sometimes even one stone, is a quasi-impossible task. The Hebron Rehabilitation Committee has documented the many impediments to building homes and renovating heritage structures in the Old City. The medal of perseverance in architecture needs to go to anyone working on a Palestinian project today.

Your work is heroic in my eyes, Elias: In the most difficult of circumstances, with limited access to materials and skilled labour, you somehow manage to lead and complete poetic architectural projects. You not only preserve Palestinian heritage, but also imbue it with new life and meaning, as exemplified by the Khan projects. I share your approach towards heritage: I see it, too, as an evolving notion, one that is being continuously and organically activated, occupied and reimagined, rather than one frozen in a past that is no more. Your work is a small victory within a heritage landscape in Palestine that has been subject to a long history of erasure and dispossession or has been actively demolished.

EK: You are so kind. We still hope that architecture can bring about change. We are simply fighting to survive and don't fully understand who we are; we just try to make it through each day without the time or space to reflect and think clearly or constructively.

Last summer, I visited Granada, and it was a truly shocking experience for me. The war in Gaza made me reflect on many of the values the West tries to impose on us and how it seeks to control us, particularly in terms of architectural values that often feel foreign to our culture.

I suddenly felt overwhelmed with emotion when I saw the architecture within the Alhambra. It made me realize how much I appreciate Western architecture — I admire figures like [Jørn] Utzon, [Luis] Barragán and Álvaro Siza. But in that moment, I understood that I also deeply value the Arab influences present in their architecture. I suddenly felt like I had lost my way over the years, and I realized I needed to return to my roots, to better understand who we are and where we are headed.

ABOVE and BELOW: This affordable housing prototype was developed by Aziza Chaoui Projects (with a team that included LafargeHolcim engineer Amal El Abdi-Alaoui and prefabrication contractor Amine Maachi Haddou) after a devastating earthquake shook Morocco in September 2023. It is constructed with building blocks that interlock without the need for mortar — an innovation custom created for the project.



A key part of architecture is having control over the urban environment. As Palestinians, we have never had control over the urban scale or fabric. We can only influence small, limited things. The greatest tool Israel uses is the control of urban space. If you look at the history of Palestine, you can see how everything has been shaped from above with one primary aim: to control the territory.

...But I would like now to speak about your architecture, Aziza!

AC: Yes, sure! But it seems secondary compared to your work. Currently, my main personal challenge is to find a balance between my role as an academic/researcher/educator and as a practitioner. I can best describe myself as an activist architect, deeply committed to connecting with communities and working on the ground with them. One of my ongoing projects, which I started in 2010, is a music school called Joudour Sahara, located in the small desert oasis of M'hamid El Ghizlane, and I co-established a not-for-profit with a local friend (Halim Sbai) and two other foreign friends to fund it. For the 2,000 kids to take free classes, in dance and music, they are required to

be part of an environmental program of tree planting and oasis regeneration, so the environmental aspect is as important as the cultural one. The school buildings use only rammed earth and local materials. The school boasts an outdoor auditorium and an underground water reservoir, which also acts as a classroom that's naturally ventilated because of the water underneath.

Also in Morocco, I completed a prototype as a volunteer with engineering colleagues for an anti-seismic house made with compressed earth bricks that are composed of 95 per cent earth and five per cent cement: They interlock without mortar so they can be built quickly. These projects exemplify my design approach, which tends to rethink vernacular typologies and construction methods.

EK: I feel there are always communities in your work, this feeling of society. You are working with net-

works and the client is also part of the community. What I want to ask you: This social architecture, this technique you use, do you think we can use it in modern architecture? Do you think it's possible to change the normal architecture we are doing?

AC: Yes! And let me tell you why: All the projects that we often see that get awards in our profession, it's often about their aesthetic or their technical and constructive innovation. But very seldom do the awards value the users' experience, the socio-economic and environmental impacts of these projects. We never ask users, "Are you happy with this building, do you use it often, are you comfortable inside it, is it answering your daily needs?" In the same vein, we rarely ask people who live near award-winning buildings how they feel about their place within the city. The role and opinion of the user is undervalued — but I think it's important to hear the voices of the future users of our buildings; it makes our designs richer. Our profession remains, after all, a service industry for a privileged few, since we only build projects for people who can afford to pay us. Our ethical role is to attempt to amplify the voices who have no seat at the decision-making table.

EK: Most people don't have this opportunity to have an architect, also here. But when I am doing projects, I also think about the neighbours. This is what I'm trying to do with the project of my brother. My brother loves me and he gives me the opportunity to make architecture. With the house I am designing for him, I want to change the neighbours — who are always fighting because they don't have space to build, and then privacy becomes a big problem. I tell them that even with small dimensions, we can go back to the patio — make a modern patio with simple things — and we can protect our privacy; we can use poor materials. I think our problem, as architects, is that we think we need to make architecture with details — "good architecture" that is shown in the media. The nice thing about Arab architecture is it can have no details. So I think the challenge now is to give people the instruments to do that kind of architecture. **AZ**

ARCHITECTURE

PROTECTIVE MEASURES



In a film still from *To Build Law*, Bplus.xyz's Olaf Grawert (pointing) and Station.plus's Alina Kolar hold a meeting to review the timeline for their HouseEurope! campaign.

WHAT IF ADAPTIVE RE-USE WERE ENSHRINED IN LAW? BERLIN STUDIO **BPLUS.XYZ** AND ITS RESEARCH ARM **STATION.PLUS** HAVE DESIGNED A DEMOCRATIC MOVEMENT FOR EUROPE TO DO JUST THAT

INTERVIEW BY ELIZABETH PAGLIACOLO & STEFAN NOVAKOVIC

THE PROJECTS OF BPLUS.XYZ sometimes have quirky names — Antivilla, Mäusebunker (Mouse House), Casa Storta (Crooked House) — which befit their transmogrified forms. Through the renovation of often brutalist structures, the Berlin firm founded by Arno Brandlhuber (first as Brandlhuber+ in 2006, then as B+ in 2021) has amassed an eclectic portfolio of imaginatively repurposed buildings. Most remarkable: its own offices in two towers that remained standing like a soaring relic after the surrounding buildings that once joined them to form a factory complex were torn down. Nicknamed San Gimignano Lichtenberg — a wink at the medieval towers of the Tuscan town — the restored buildings are the locus of a growing movement.

The firm's latest undertaking is the design of legislation that would incentivize adaptive re-use over the type of demolition followed by real estate speculation that typically leads to housing shortages in cities around the continent. The campaign is called HouseEurope! — another spirited name, this time not for a single building but for the future of housing across multiple regions — and it seeks to tap into the power of European Citizens' Initiatives (ECI), whereby citizen councils made up of seven members from seven EU countries galvanize fellow nationals to propose new laws. In order for the desired legislation to be brought forward to the European Commission (which could then endorse it to the European Parliament and the Council), an ECI needs to reach one million signatures in 12 months.

Let the race begin: In November 2024, Bplus.xyz officially launched its ECI drive — but not before establishing a policy lab. Together with Station.plus, its teaching and research platform in ETH Zurich's architecture department, it has fine-tuned a communications campaign that could foster democratic support for a renovation-first model. All of this is captured in the documentary and exhibition *To Build Law*, curated by Francesco



Garutti alongside film director Joshua Frank for the Canadian Centre for Architecture as part of the museum's Groundwork series. During the Montreal premiere, *Azure's* Elizabeth Pagliacolo and Stefan Novakovic met up with Bplus.xyz's Olaf Grawert and Station.plus's Alina Kolar to learn more about what it takes to design preservation law.

Elizabeth Pagliacolo: Please explain the legislation that you're seeking to enact. Would it create a legal framework around preserving buildings?

OLAF GRAWERT: No, but it would make the renovation and transformation of existing buildings economically viable so people would say "I'll just do this." There are three main incentives: The first is tax reductions on renovation and transformation work and re-used materials so that this work is just cheaper. The second is to change the way we look at existing buildings so that we no longer only see all the risks, but also the potentials. And then the third one is giving the CO₂ in the building a value. When you demolish, you would pay for throwing away the embodied CO₂.

There's also another financial incentive: subsidies. Right now, you have a lot of subsidized loans for new construction, for instance to build your single-family house. It was hilarious when the Conservative Party said, "We will give a €30,000 property tax break to every family with two children who wants to build a single-family house." They thought that's an incentive to get to two children, because we're an aging society. So it would solve problem number one, and then it boosts the building industry, which is super important. But it has consequences, because you also have to build streets, schools, a kindergarten — and that leads to suburban sprawl.

EP: How and when did the project of HouseEurope! begin for the firm?

OG: It was at the point when we realized that the way we had practised until then no longer functioned. It's the moment when the pressure on the land, on the building stock and



LEFT: A section model of the Mäusebunker (below) and the branding for HouseEurope! are displayed at the Canadian Centre for Architecture's exhibition.



PHOTOS BY ROBERT SWIERCZYŃSKI (SAN GIMIGNANO LICHTENBERG AND MÄUSEBUNKER); COURTESY OF CCA (TO BUILD LAW EXHIBITION AND FILM)

on the market gets so high that people think it makes automatic economic sense to demolish and build new. And this is a learning for any context, and it can happen anywhere, not only in cities. When we travelled to South Tyrol, which seems a rather rural area, and spoke to people there, they would say, “We cannot afford housing anymore. Our buildings are demolished, rebuilt for hotels or second homes.” So this mechanism of value creation is something that happens everywhere.

In essence, we were working on a project, and our usual method did not function any longer because the value of the land was so high that investors said, “No matter what you do, we’re going to demolish and build new.” In that moment, we realized that we could no longer look for loopholes — we could no longer see existing laws as a design tool, but actually had to design the law as a tool.

EP: That project was Mäusebunker, a former research facility that did animal testing. (Bplus.xyz joined an effort led by architect and conservationist Gunnar Klack and Felix Torkar of SOSBrutalism to save Mäusebunker, designed by Gerd and Magdalena Hänska and built between 1971 and 1981).

OG: Yes, this gigantic brutalist concrete building with blue tubes. It was an unused building and we made an offer to take it over and re-use it. We made a proposal, and in the moment when the proposal was actually being checked — is it viable? Can it function? — our banker said, “We cannot finance this project because there are so many risks, but there are no risks in new construction.” And we said, “But that’s not true.” You don’t know which risks are in the existing building, but you also don’t know which risks are in the new project — especially at the time, shortly after the pandemic, when all the supply chains collapsed. And then the war in Ukraine started, and energy prices rocketed. So all of a sudden, you were in a situation where new construction is full of risks.

ALINA KOLAR: And then, from the perspective of Station.plus, there’s how that practice evolves in the sense of storytelling. It’s not only designing the law, but also designing the advent of an idea into culture. And in that sense, Mäusebunker is an interesting example, where the narrative becomes very clear that the demolition is as outdated as animal testing

— and food waste and single-use plastics, all things that are relatable for people. So it’s the designing of the law, and then the understanding of, like, is there a way that we can make this more accessible through storytelling? And what would that be?

Stefan Novakovic: Because of the way that the laws are constructed, there’s this element of direct democracy. You need the signatures, so you can’t just design the law in and of itself without designing a sort of broader cultural shift to inspire that change.

AK: In the case of the European Citizens’ Initiative, yes, but there are other ways, too. We spoke to media agencies in order to understand, how do you do a campaign? And do we really want to do this? Or do we just want to lobby? In our understanding of direct democracy, we think it’s a good idea to bring a collaborative level and more people into this conversation and to expand this understanding of the built environment.

EP: And the language that you developed grew from that. I really love your slogan “Power to Renovation” — that you use the word “renovation” rather than a more architectural term like



Creating slogans that resonate with the public — such as “Fix it!” — was a major focus of the campaign.

THERE ARE FOUR LAYERS
TO COMMUNICATING
THE CAMPAIGN: SOCIAL,
ECOLOGICAL, ECONOMIC
AND CULTURAL.

“adaptive re-use.” How did you create a consensus around how you’re telling the story and how you’re testing it with different audiences?

AK: We consulted with a very big media agency because we wanted to have someone who approached the mainstream from a sales perspective and knew how to reach many people. And we had a lot of conversations. They were giving us three ways for how we could approach the campaign with specific slogans like “The Fundamentals of Forever,” which also came with an aesthetic and a vibe. We were like, “This is grammatically wrong.” They were thinking “the fundamental” like “foundations,” but they came up with these slightly wrong English phrases. With the visuals, it seemed very conservative and not open for change.

We had made this comparison — that demolition is as outdated as food waste — but the agency felt we should say demolition is as outdated as fossil fuel-based cars and *blah blah blah*. And we said, “We get what you mean, but the terms you use did not create consensus for us, while food waste, animal testing, and single-use plastics are things that speak to people.” So there were a lot of conversations around it, and at a certain point I said, “I have to stop this now.” But I’m happy we had them, because they made us come up with our own proposals, which then feels natural.

EP: During this process, you learned that 18-to-24-year-olds didn’t seem as engaged with this topic. How do you target them specifically? Were there any learnings there?



The brutalist towers that Bplus. xyz saved (below) and adapted into its headquarters (right), dubbing it San Gimignano Lichtenberg, display the power of renovating industrial buildings with new uses.



AK: The agency's idea was to leave them out: Go for the lowest threshold to reach people if we are only talking about one million signatures, right? But then I can make the point that this disregards architecture students — who are definitely still interested in the topic. But they were not represented in the 1,000 people polled.

There was also this conversation where they suggested that we only generate leads. They wanted us to find a million euros — one euro per signature — to just generate the leads online. It's an algorithmic way of reaching people several times, but we would have no idea who's voting. I guess you can do that, but if you think about direct democracy, and if you want to talk to people and extend the entire understanding of how the built environment actually relates to your life, it's not really the way to go.

SN: You're not building a movement, you're not building a community, you're not building a discourse.

OG: Also, it does something else: It forces you to create taglines and slogans that are so generic and open, like "Change now." And even "Fix it," one of our slogans, is already very close to being very generic. But you can always sense how you have to address different people with different arguments. There are those who are open to the social argument — that in saving the buildings, you save the neighbourhood, the community, the fabric of the city. You

sense that they are also clearly on the ecological path, because in every second sentence, they speak about CO₂ emissions. With conservatives, you speak about heritage.

There are these four layers — social, ecological, economic and cultural. You just order them differently depending on who you are speaking to. It's not that we don't tell everyone everything, but in the European context, you would start with the social democratic one, followed by the economic one, followed by the ecological and then the cultural. You can create orders of arguments.

EP: What's the argument for people who only care about the economics?

OG: Every million dollars invested in renovation creates an average 12 to 18 jobs, and you are able to create industry that is less dependent on global material chains. So you shift the money you invest from material to maker, and that also leads to a growth in your economy. It's supporting your national industry in the moment where people are like, "Oh my God, can we no longer rely on global dependencies?" This economic argument also takes away the anxiety that what we suggest is killing industry or jobs. It's not true.

EP: And then the other argument I'm interested in is this idea about value. Even the building that you work out of — the San Gimignano Lichtenberg — is a really industrial building. The average person might not see the heritage meaning in that. So how do we define value? And how do we quantify the value of existing structures, even if they're raw concrete towers?

OG: You feel like you have two realities. You can take the towers as an example, but you could also take a lot of other modernist buildings as cases — and then also, in an Eastern European context, a lot of prefabricated, socialist state-built housing, where the buildings are tied to a political system. There are people who say, "It's ugly, but I don't care." But then there are others who say, "I really have a problem with it; I want it to go." But they don't fully understand that the new build will be — *has* to be — more expensive. What



usually happens in Europe when a building is demolished and then rebuilt is that there are fewer people [but they are] in bigger and more expensive apartments. So the culture argument is the most difficult one, because it's almost like trauma therapy. It's a bit weird because you have to accept that this trauma is not connected to a building, and then you have to find some healing in it.

AK: It also gives you back your agency; there is this power in these buildings, right? And if you think that you can actually do something with it, that you just don't have to get rid of it, then you can also change that power you have to do something — also because renovation is easier, smaller and step-by-step, whereas the construction of new and big buildings takes it away from you completely. There's a relation to direct democracy there as well.

SN: There are very obvious historical precedents for how our tastes and preferences and our values as a society change and evolve with relation to architecture. For a while in North America, for instance, people thought Victorian housing was crap, and now everybody loves Victorian houses. From a design perspective, your work is also really sexy. So in terms of design, how do you approach these types of buildings like your own office building, and what do you do as a designer to make it beautiful in the eyes of someone like me, or to get it on the cover of a magazine?

OG: This is the taste question. And thank you — I would agree! I think that what we can do, amongst students and professionals, is to make this way of practising a viable alternative, one where students say, "Oh, that's interesting: I can imagine having a practice that only does renovation, transformation and re-use — and make it look sexy." On the other hand, my brother, who has now renovated our family house, would say, "I don't work hard to have something that looks like it's not done," you know? So he wants it to be finished. This whole adaptive re-use world looks so much like a DIY aesthetic — which is totally valid but it excludes a lot of people who just want something to be finished. I think that the question

is, how many other aesthetics do we need to find that follow the similar logic and offer everyone something? Because it needs to become a lifestyle. People need to say, "I want this."

SN: It's interesting. I'm thinking about the evolution of tastes. Pierre Bourdieu might say, "Your project is on the cover of the *New York Times Style Magazine*, which means it now becomes the taste of rich people, which means that in 50 years, it's what middle-class people are going to want." But you're talking about material honesty. You're not building that argument just as an abstract philosophical one; there is a rationale for material honesty in terms of its ease of maintenance, and so we can give it an economic basis.

OG: Yes, in fact, we did this project in Minneapolis, this conversion of a parking garage, and we were there for the facade mock-up. So we visited different companies, and one of them said, "Well, we can do this aluminum facade." And they put a sheet in front of me, and I looked at it in section: super-thin aluminum, plastic core and super-thin aluminum. I said, "Do you have this in solid aluminum?" And he said, "Yes, of course." And he brings the other sample. This for sure is more expensive, the pure aluminum one? And he said no. But why wouldn't I then take the pure aluminum one? And he said that because the plastic core one is x per cent lighter, the panel can be x per cent bigger, and one worker can install more facade more quickly, because they don't get tired.

And I was sitting there, and I thought, that's super difficult, because now labour is the argument that, in that sense, makes the material that destroys the planet more viable. It's only a tiny margin — but then, of course, you build a skyscraper and this tiny margin becomes, all of a sudden, real money, and you see this potential to save thousands of dollars. So they say "Let's go for the plastic one" because the consequences of the plastic one have no price.

SN: We see the material as a variable, but for whatever reason, we don't see the labour as a variable. In that sense, we tend to see the current logic of the market as something immovable, even though so many factors can shift.

AK: It's movable — and this is at the core of what we're doing. This is a systemic change for cultures — it doesn't need to be like any of that.

OG: Sometimes you ask yourself, what is really better? Then, as an architect, you should also suggest the operating model of the building, and discuss with the developer how they ensure that, afterwards, it is not an empty tower that just functions as an asset.

I was in New York recently, and my friends were telling me what has been demolished for these buildings to be built, for instance along the High Line. They put a map of Manhattan on the table, where the different parts have the flags of the countries where the money comes from. Because you can just trace it back, that all of these buildings have been built from three funds from one country, just as an investment. And then you ask, "But what is the use, and who is in there?" No one. Okay, you still have people who want to live in the city, so politics has to create the framework and the conditions to ensure that whatever is demolished to be rebuilt is serving someone something. Because this is crazy. **AZ**