

**Pidgin 24**

# Contents

<b>More Glueing. More Doing.</b> Erin Besler and Ian Besler	8
<b>Being Real-Time: A Critique of Instantaneous Architectural Making</b> Zach Cohen <i>Response by Ryan Luke Johns</i>	24  32
<b>Returning to a Loveable Object</b> Andrea Tse Fung Ng	38
<b>Ethos Office: A Design Manual for the Future of Work</b> Daniel Jacobs	46
<b>Decorated Watersheds: Ruins of Empire in Kinshasa</b> Zachariah DeGiulio	68
<b>Pinkwashing</b> Joanna Grant	84
<b>The Age of Fragmentation</b> Savia Palate	96
<b>Charade Aesthetics: A Foray into the Bowerbirds' Courtship Structures</b> Isidoro Michan Guindi	108

- 124 **Deep-frying the Kitbash**  
Justin Fowler
- 142 **Geoffrey Bawa in the Age of Cultural Appropriation**  
George Grylls
- 158 **"Silcrete": A material investigation exploring the possibilities of soft concrete & hard silicone**  
Mélanie Daguin
- 164 **The Great Divide**  
Andrej Iwanski
- 178 **Alfred Sloan in Moscow**  
Daniel Jonas Roche
- 200 **Home as *mother!*-Earth**  
Ali Reza Shahbazin
- 222 **Pop Goes the Weasel or What is Mass Architecture? A (Very) Late Postmodernism**  
Parsa Khalili
- 242 **Some Los Angeles Buildings**  
Steve Martinez

# Ethos Office: A Design Manual for the Future of Work

Daniel Jacobs

*The office itself seemed like a special place, even in its pale yellow desperate light... there was the belief that you were secure here, in some emotional way, that you lived in known terrain... you could not walk among those desks for two thousand mornings... without coming to believe that this was where you were safe.<sup>1</sup>*

– Don DeLillo, *Americana*, 1971

The space of the office is in a moment of crisis. Corporations advertise the office interior as a place of perpetual social and aesthetic revolution.

This serves to mask the true agency of the office: delimiting notions of proprietary citizenship, enforcing labor expectations, amending class hierarchies, imposing regulations and deterrents, and encouraging specific human interactions.

Today, office design increasingly co-opts this social, cultural, and political microcosm, reinforcing a core ecosystem of hyper-production and conformity. Increasingly complex technological, spatial, and material regimes may aesthetically differentiate these microcosms, but at the expense of the identity of the worker, both as an individual and a collective. This precariat/cognitariat worker-subject becomes dispersed and diffused through the seamless imbrication of spaces of work and life. Workers have little recourse but to absorb these accelerating conditions: coerced to wade through the hazy gradients of power and increasingly subtle methods of control enacted against them. Is it possible to define a new ethos for the office interior to challenge this dominant condition? What, if anything, can architecture do to help?

The current form of the office environment is the result of a lineage of manipulation, experimentation, and labor struggle performed by corporations, researchers, and workers. This multiplicity of actors—from industrial and “human factor” designers perfecting the ergonomic relationships between body and workstation to psychologists testing the impact of environmental

factors on productivity, sociologists manipulating interpersonal and group dynamics, or space planners optimizing floor plans based on economic models—all contribute to data sets used to justify different spatial and aesthetic regimes. Analysis and synthesis of this data find reification through three primary structures: new spatial systems, furniture systems, and technology systems.

Together these constitute a current *nomos*, a terrain of latent rules, governing the “ideal” office environment. In order to establish a firm ground upon which to formulate a critique and clear a space for resistance, we must first examine how past propositions and experiments were co-opted and denatured into their extant forms.

#### SPATIAL SYSTEMS: OFFICE LANDSCAPES

Spatial systems deploy the reciprocal relationship between furniture, structure, and architectural elements to organize social interaction and labor. Traditionally, the governing spatial system of the office was a clear give-and-take between open desk areas and private offices, establishing a hierarchy between management and workers. One of the most radical spatial counter-narratives against this dominant system was the *Bürolandschaft* (office landscape) planning model.

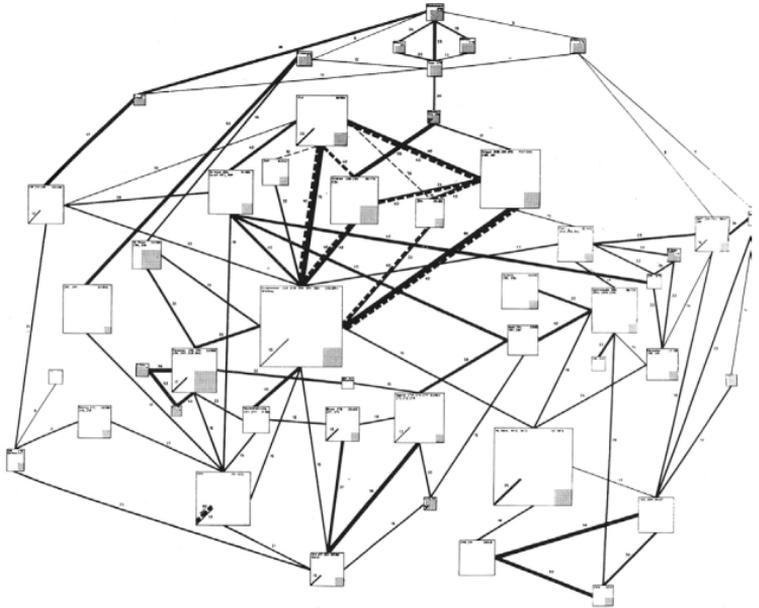


Fig. 1:  
Quickborner  
Team cybernetic  
organization  
diagram, 1960.

In the late 1950s, Eberhardt and Wolfgang Schnelle—then planners at the Velox furniture company—formed an office planning and research organization called the Quickborner Team, executing a number of projects in the 1960s such as the iconic Buch and Ton office for the Bertelsmann media company.<sup>2</sup>

Initially, the *Bürolandschaft* system appears to be an organic, scattered, and random array of desks in an open plan office. However, the Quickborner Team used *Organisationskybernetik*, organizational cybernetic principles—thoroughly analyzing and tabulating information flows within the office—to systematically and precisely organize furniture, partitions, plants, storage, circulation, leisure spaces, gathering spaces, and atmospheric conditions. The resulting data fed into a logistical system that constantly restructured the relationship between worker and environment, establishing an unstable spatial condition controlled by the process of work itself [fig. 1].

In opposition to the visible hierarchies established by the architecture of the private versus open office, the *Bürolandschaft* smoothed these class differences, blending structures of power through an indifferent cybernetic process. The abstraction of the office environment itself became the governing machine, incessantly retooled to fit the changing needs of the corporation.<sup>3</sup>

This cybernetic process orchestrating this office environment came to symbolize a growing belief in the promise of the future automation of administrative work. As noted by Andreas Rumpfhuber, this belief led to the idea that the space of leisure would become one of the most important spaces in the office landscape as systems of automation reduced the amount of necessary labor time.<sup>4</sup>

The break-out room and lounge came to symbolize this transitional space towards the ultimate “wholesale redundancy of office buildings and workplace architecture in general,” as this utopian ethos evolved.<sup>5</sup> Any advances in efficiency of the cybernetic engine would bring the office environment a step further towards this ideal, and the aesthetic regime of the *Bürolandschaft* was merely a byproduct of this techno-positivist automation.

Contemporary examples frequently deploy versions of the *Bürolandschaft* aesthetic without maintaining its cybernetic instability, appropriating the sign of its ethos as a branding strategy. Frank Gehry’s design for the Facebook Headquarters in Menlo Park, California (known as MPK 20), is reminiscent of the *Bürolandschaft* model with desks, gathering spaces, kitchens, lounges, cafes, bathrooms, circulation space, and plants (of course), jostled and scattered throughout the 433,000-square-foot space. MPK 20 boasts



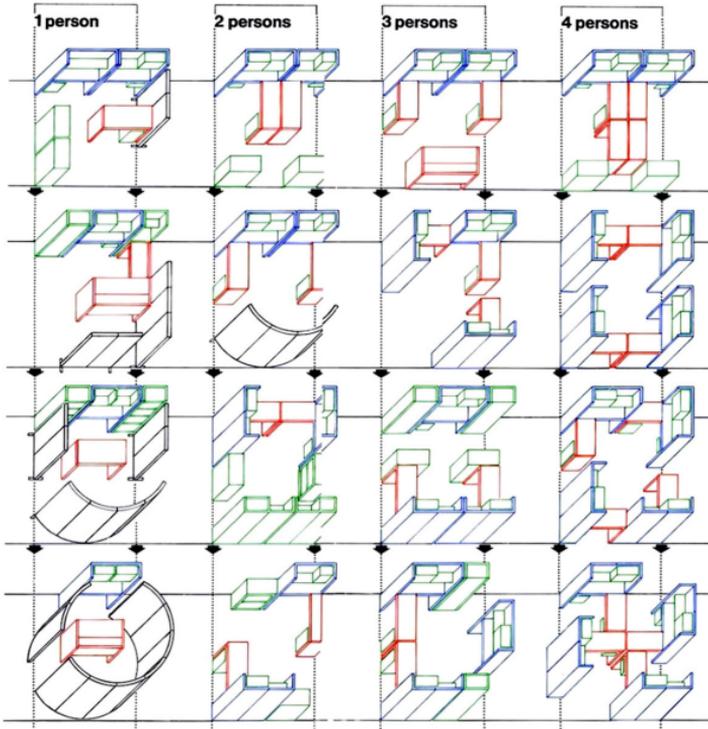
Fig. 2: Model photograph of the world's largest open plan office in Facebook's MPK 20.

the largest single open plan in the world [fig. 2], housing over 2,800 workers. The organicism of the plan is not a malleable and unstable organism, but rather a static representation of the social network provided by Facebook itself. While workers in MPK 20 move freely from their fixed desks to spaces of leisure to the landscaped rooftop terrace (equal in size to the office interior), their transitory ethos (read: virtual identity) is still bounded by the architecture of the massive factory-like perimeter (read: Facebook). Even CEO Mark Zuckerberg sits at a desk like everyone else, hiding among the nomadic masses. But Zuckerberg isn't everyone else.

As the contradictions embedded in their utopian vision continue to exacerbate conflict in our social and political infrastructures,<sup>6</sup> they double down on an aesthetic project to reclaim their status as an innocent platform provider, helping to conceal true abuses of power. While the *Bürolandschaft* system became irrelevant through the increasingly virtual space of work, its aesthetic continues to define an ideological representation for the corporation as a non-hierarchical organism.

#### FURNITURE SYSTEMS: DESCENDANTS OF THE ACTION OFFICE

Furniture manufacturers ensure that their products saturate these spatial systems through



a unique form of propaganda: the workplace design manual. A combination of advertisement and scientific publication, these manuals situate the workstation itself as the nexus of ergonomic research, worker psychology, and social engineering, laying out instructions and guidelines for optimization. Embedded in the object of the workstation is a double nature of private individual

Fig. 3: Diagram showing combinatorics of the Knoll Stephens system, 1971.

use and pervasive managerial control in the office. From the monastic scriptorium to the clerk's filing desk, these micro-architectures more precisely define and control the subjectivity of the worker through their daily processes of work. The evolution of the workstation—especially contract furniture systems by manufacturers like Steelcase, Knoll, and Herman Miller—appeals to a deep desire for the worker to stake claim to private property and assert identity in an otherwise homogenizing and indifferent environment. Customizable, combinatorial, and component-based interfaces work to provide the illusion of satisfying these personal needs while individuating the worker within spatial system of the office interior [fig. 3].

The contract furniture example that most precisely reveals this double nature is Herman Miller's Action Office (AO) system. Inspired by the ideology of the *Bürolandschaft*, the research division of Herman Miller began experimenting with furniture systems recognizing the need for adaptability to modulating information flows and working processes. In 1964, designers Robert Propst and George Nelson developed the AOI system, consisting of a variety of modules including desks, shelving units, chairs, and tables, deployable at any orientation and angle. This produced spatial terrains similar to the *Bürolandschaft* system, but proved too costly and inefficient for Herman Miller's corporate clientele.

The subsequent AOII system used cheaper materials, introduced eye-level partitions, and could be deployed at either 90° or 120° angles, turning a robust and adaptable system into a more rigid grid with fewer variations. To hedge against this potential inflexibility, Propst outlined “principles of operation” for the system in his 1968 design manual titled *The Office: A Facility Based on Change*.

This text introduced the figure of the “Administrator,” responsible for leading the planning of the office environment with “facility simulation” tools from large physical models to early digital visualization software like the Customized Action Office CAD System.<sup>7</sup> These logistical tools replaced the continual data analytic process of the *Bürolandschaft* system with more control by individual “operators” at the helm of their workstation-as-cockpit: modulating their physical environment to adapt to the influx of information streaming through their terminals [fig. 4].<sup>8</sup>

Despite Propst’s clear articulation and recommendations for use, the profusion of middle management demanding more privacy in the 1970s and 1980s combined with an amendment to the United States tax code allowing corporations to write off depreciating assets including furniture systems, caused the popularity of the AOII system to explode and its form to crystallize into

the cubicle format so ingrained in our cultural imaginary.

This further congealed the managerial protocol of treating each worker as a data point in a homogeneous data set. Instead of an individual pilot autonomously operating their cockpit, the worker became an anonymous subject controlled by an invisible operator. As Propst observed, the office became “a place for transacting abstractions,” and the worker, discretized through the aesthetic regime of the cubicle, became another one of those abstractions.<sup>9</sup>

Contract furniture companies continue to produce these systems but rebrand them with new material palettes and diverse spatial arrangements using terms like “hives,” “clusters,” “forums,” and “coves,” to demarcate optimized spaces of social exchange. Such jargon of productivity, diversity, collectivity, and personal privacy clearly appeals to both worker and corporation but serves to naturalize a multiplicity of human interactions expected in the space of work. Underneath this jargon, companies integrate new technologies into the furniture itself to further advance the worker-as-data model.

Herman Miller’s new Live OS furniture platform contains sensors that “capture space utilization data” and ergonomic preferences of workers, synthesizing this data through an easy-to-use

digital interface. The platform is capable of determining when people are at their desks and for how long, helping office managers with space planning decisions and “energizing” the workplace by helping “individuals gradually achieve activity goals.”<sup>10</sup>

This Internet of Things (IoT) integration was the inevitable next step for companies to gather minute-by-minute data about their workforce. With increasing access to these biopolitical surveillance systems, the invisible operators of the office have more control over these systems of labor and productivity than ever before.

## TECHNOLOGY SYSTEMS: THE VIRTUAL OFFICE

The promise of total technological integration into the space of labor has its roots in years of experimentation with networked and wireless computers, mobile phones, wireless Internet. In 1993, architect Gaetano Pesce designed the Chiat/Day Office in New York, in which they removed workstations altogether, replacing them with a landscape of pure leisure: plush lounges, cafe tables, living rooms, wheeled metal mesh desks, and televisions in a series of social spaces all rendered in a rebelliously garish multi-colored glossy resin [fig. 5]. This new protocol of digital emancipation demanded that workers check out a cell phone and laptop upon entering every morning

Opp. Fig. 4: Herman Miller's Action Office II system from Robert Propst's *The Office: A Facility Based on Change* for Herman Miller's Action Office, 1968.

Fig. 5: Don Walsh and Jacques Piccard in the bathyscaphe Trieste on January 23, 1960.



and then territorialize whatever domesticized space they could claim. In the now familiar Jobsian rhetoric, this system “promoted encounters and unplanned collaborations,”<sup>11</sup> and caused social interaction to become a key form of labor production.

While this technology may allow the worker to emerge victorious over the regime of the cubicle, it also acclimates workers to the ubiquity of labor production in this recently domesticated landscape. Assigning a myriad of new aesthetic categories—soft, homey, edgy, cute, nostalgic, etc.—to spaces of labor further naturalizes the biopolitical surveillance of the worker in and outside of work. As companies like WeWork double down on data analytics as a tool to keep tabs on worker contentment (critical to keep them paying rent), they resort to even more pervasive technology platforms to influence and observe.

Combining proprietary social networking and community programming apparatuses within these normalized spaces of leisure and domesticity (WeLive), they can define a holistic and homogenized control platform harmoniously uniting all spaces of labor production and social interaction.

## RESISTANCE IS NATURAL

What forms of spatial and architectural resistance are possible given such embedded and pervasive regimes of surveilled and analyzed subjectivity, aesthetic homogeneity, and social control?

Especially given the “failures” of the previous examples, how can we begin to conceptually challenge these ever-refining procedures or, as John Harwood asks in his essay “Corporate Abstraction”: “how can architecture remediate the corporation?”<sup>12</sup> Can architecture help rebrand our expectations of labor itself?

Although tempting, a revolutionary stance of rehearsed appeals to Bartleby’s “I would prefer not to”<sup>13</sup> or “Unworking” *à la* Valerie Solanas’s *SCUM Manifesto*<sup>14</sup> offer legitimate modes of personal and collective revolution, they fail to offer a sufficient spatial proposition for the inevitability of work and its spaces of labor.

An accelerationist techno-futurism promising the diminishing of work at the hands of automation and applied technology—regardless of its attendant socio-political frameworks—is too dangerously close to what has already been co-opted by corporations and infrastructures of control. The importance of appropriating and utilizing the same technological tools in step with those in power is not to be understated, but such

technological or analytic interfaces rarely engage explicitly with architecture.

Any alternatives to these doctrines of revolution and acceleration appear distinctly banal, but that might be exactly what is necessary. As Herman Miller recently published in its propagandistic advertising outlet *WHY Magazine*: “as it turns out, the reason we need to control our environment is precisely because it controls us... Once you give people control... you’ll start to get that elusive metric of productivity.”<sup>15</sup> To resist this environment (read: corporation) controlling us, a new techno-aesthetic ethos requires that it contain as little as possible to co-opt, corrupt, and exploit by anyone other than the workers themselves.

If the space of labor includes only objects and tools absolutely essential for the production of work, the human interface may be able to re-engage the relationships and power structures governing their labor as such. The possibility of an architecture—and a coincident society and politics—which limits the expectations of socialization and non-work-related productivity within the office to the bareness of the work itself is more crucial now than ever. Branding strategies not unlike contemporary play-books of ascetic-aesthetic minimalism (think Steve Jobs sitting on the floor in his empty apartment) could invigorate new imaginaries of simple and quiet resistance. As a reappropriation of technology and contemporary design culture,

minimalism and new approaches to the sensorial regimes of materials could begin to offer a way out of the dominant landscape.

This is not a call for a pure sensibility of the generic or the literal as an abstract representation and critique of economic management. Rather, novel material realities of the interior become crucial to define discrete environments for labor production that explicitly separate themselves from aesthetic regimes of the domestic interior or the public sphere. An example might be found in architecture firm SO-IL's design for the New York office of video production company, Logan. Essentially, the project contains a pair of monolithic communal work tables fitted with power outlets and separated by translucent scrim walls like those in a Robert Irwin installation [fig. 6].

The result is a space of pseudo-privacy and a perpetually blurred and diffused social confrontation. Ideologically, it reflects a mode of soft ascetic minimalism emphasizing the ethos of use over ownership and private property, or in the case of the office, over territorialization and excessive comfort. While monastic orders sought an equivalence between 'the rule' and form-of-life as a challenge to 'the law,' this new office would need to bracket its asceticism exclusively within the space of work. The material architecture demarcates this zone but dissolves into its function as a bare space of work.



Or perhaps architecture can only take us so far. Maybe something even more extreme is in order: a reverse Taylorism enacted by workers themselves, collectively confronting our own labor time through contemporary modes of technological surveillance. Like a virtual punch clock in each worker's company-issued Apple Watch: a self-imposed check and counter to the expectations of hyper-production and cross-dissolve between work and life. Instead of a form of self-flagellation, this could encourage a communally monitored territory of discussion and debate. By using technology to hold up a mirror to ourselves and our labor habits, we may find modes to combat the one-way mirror of managerial control.

Fig. 6: Interior of Logan Offices by SO-IL, 2012.

This redeployment of the hard powers of time management and architectural demarcation can serve to combat the soft managerial powers of domestic comfort and social engineering. Could such an ethos subsequently generate new spatial systems, furniture, and technologies? An office of voids and absences: spaces neither for work, nor life, but for bare use reserved for undefined function, immunized against transformation with new sensorial conditions. An office of separations and boundaries: allowing workers to isolate and name the distinct territories of labor and society with new spatial and material systems. An office of social deprivation chambers: existing only to resist, to expel, to exclude.

As subjects within these microcosms of surveillance and experimentation, the workers must first see themselves as automatons: self-isolated and discretized in a carefully coordinated series of social exchanges timed according to a new liturgy of the hours. This new office ethos requires a collective rejection of—and confrontation—with the status quo of comfort, pleasure, and fun, not only clearing away the excessive tendency to indulge in the office interior, but by proposing a new bareness of surface and precision of social interaction.

## Notes:

- <sup>1</sup> Don DeLillo, *Americana* (New York: Penguin Books, 1989), 20.
- <sup>2</sup> Wolfgang Schnelle, *A Discursive Approach to Organizational and Strategy Consulting* (Norderstedt, Germany: Books on Demand, 2008), 89.
- <sup>3</sup> Andreas Rumpfhuber, "'Space of Information Flow - The Schnelle Brothers' Office Landscape 'Buch und Ton'" in *Experiments in Architecture between Science and the Arts Vol. 2*, eds. Akos Moravansky and Albert Kirchengast (Berlin: Jovis, 2011), 200-226.
- <sup>4</sup> Andreas Rumpfhuber, 'Housing Labor' in *e-Flux Journal: Artificial Labor* (2017), <http://www.e-flux.com/architecture/artificial-labor/140678/housing-labor/>.
- <sup>5</sup> Rumpfhuber (2011), 219.
- <sup>6</sup> On Tuesday, April 10th, 2018, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg testified before the United States Congress, who questioned him about Facebook's privacy policies, mishandling of user information, and their role in policing "fake news" during the 2016 United States presidential election.
- <sup>7</sup> Robert Propst, *The Office - A Facility Based on Change* (Elmhurst: Business Press International, Inc., 1968), 35-71.
- <sup>8</sup> Branden Hookway, "Cockpit" in *Cold War Hothouses*, eds. Beatriz Colomina, Annmarie Brennan, and Jeannie Kim (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2004), 46-49.
- <sup>9</sup> Propst (1968), 19.
- <sup>10</sup> "Live OS." Live OS - Herman Miller. Herman Miller, Inc., accessed 7 July 2018, <https://www.hermanmiller.com/products/smart-office/smart-furnishings/live-os/>.
- <sup>11</sup> Walter Isaacson, *Steve Jobs* (London: Little, Brown and Company, 2011), 431.
- <sup>12</sup> John Harwood, "Corporate Abstraction" in *Perspecta 46: Error* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2014): 218-243.
- <sup>13</sup> Herman Melville, *Bartleby, The Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street, 1853* (Minneapolis: Indulgence Press, 1995).
- <sup>14</sup> Valerie Solanas, *SCUM Manifesto* (New York: self-published, 1967).
- <sup>15</sup> Eva Fisher, "The Great Debate: Not Even a Question" in *WHY Magazine*. Herman Miller, Inc., accessed 7 July 2018, [https://www.hermanmiller.com/global/en\\_apc/why/the-great-debate.html](https://www.hermanmiller.com/global/en_apc/why/the-great-debate.html).



## Contributors

Erin Besler and Ian Besler are co-founders of Besler & Sons. Erin is an Assistant Professor at the Princeton University School of Architecture. Ian is a Visiting Assistant Professor at Pratt Institute in the Communications Design Department in the School of Design, and an Instructor at Santa Monica College. Chase Galis is in the Master of Architecture program at Princeton University. Dongxiao Cheng is completing his Master of Architecture at UCLA A.U.D.

Zach Cohen recently graduated from the Master of Science in Architecture Studies program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He is currently a Technical Instructor at MIT and an Adjunct Lecturer at the Wentworth Institute of Technology, as well as principal of a small architectural design practice in New York City called Shiber Cohen Studio.

Mélanie Daguin is an M.Arch candidate at Princeton University.

Zachariah DeGiulio graduated with a BSE in Civil Engineering from Princeton University in 2018. He is a 2018–19 Fulbright research fellow at Ardhi University in Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania.

Justin Fowler is a Ph.D Candidate at the Princeton University School of Architecture and an Instructor at the University of Oregon School of Architecture & Environment.

Joanna Grant is a partner of Bureau Spectacular and a lecturer at the University of Southern California.

George Grylls is an architectural journalist based in London. His writing has appeared in the RIBA Journal and the Brooklyn Rail.

Isidoro Michan Guindi received his M.Arch from Princeton University in 2018.

Andrej Iwanski received his Master of Architecture from the Azrieli School of Architecture and Urbanism at Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada. His thesis project was awarded the Royal Architecture Institute of Canada Student Medal. He now works at an architecture office in his hometown of Hamburg, Germany.

Daniel Jacobs is an Architect and Lecturer at Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning at the University of Michigan and director of the design collaborative HOME-OFFICE.

Ryan Luke Johns is the principal of GREYSHED, a design, research and consultancy practice focused on augmented materiality, robotics, and the role of actuation and sensing technologies in architecture, art, design and manufacturing.

Parsa Khalili is a Visiting Adjunct at the Princeton University School of Architecture and co-founder of the New York based practice FORMA Architects.

Steve Martinez is an M.Arch candidate at Princeton University.

Andrea Tse Fung Ng an M.Arch candidate at Princeton University.

Savia Palate is a Ph.D candidate at the University of Cambridge. She received an M.A. in History and Critical Thinking from the Architectural Association School of London and an M.Arch II in Space, Society, and Culture as a Fulbright Scholar from the Pennsylvania State University.

Daniel Jonas Roche is an aspiring architect and journalist from Boston. Having recently completed his masters diploma in Urban Design from the Strelka Institute in Moscow, Daniel is interested in pursuing a Ph.D in Architecture exploring Alfred Sloan's general impact on 21st century architecture and urbanism.

Ali Reza Shahbazin is a Ph.D student in History and Theory of Architecture at McGill University. His research interests are city novels, fictive space, Middle Eastern art, architecture and literary studies. He has written two novels in Farsi, "The Night of Regicide" and "Every Soul will Taste of Death".

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Daniel Jacobs

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Zachariah DeGiulio

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George Grylls

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Parsa Khalili

Diagram by author.

Daniel Jonas Roche

Fig. 1: Michigan State Historic Preservation Office, "General Motors Technical Center (1956) Eero Saarinen" available under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.0 Generic (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0), <https://www.flickr.com/photos/mish-po/3659654151>.

Fig. 2: Screen captures, Skolkovo Foundation. "Skolkovo Dome" Filmed [December 2010]. Youtube video 02:18. Posted [April 2012]. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HUBkQvTNRdk>

Fig. 3: Screen capture, Massachusetts Institute of Technology. "Sloan to partner with SKOLKOVO" (February 3, 2009). Retrieved October 4, 2018. <http://news.mit.edu/2009/sloan-skolkovo-0203>

Fig. 4: Screen capture, Google Maps, retrieved October 4, 2018. <https://www.google.com/maps/@55.6989307,37.35926,942m/data=!3m1!1e3>.

## About the Cover

Caroline O'Donnell

At Pidgin's conception, alternative names were tossed around – Beef, Frank, Medium-Rare, and Asparagus-Asparagus – but the final choice won out because its phonetic captured the spirit of two of the little journal's key concepts: a language formed by many, and a low-tech dispatch. This dispatch was to be rough and ready, dirty and unfinished. And of course, with pigeon mail comes pigeon shit. In fact, everything leaves a trace and we, in this era and culture, have been too ready to ignore the traces that we are leaving.

Pigeon excrement in cities is considered a nuisance, eroding façades and staining car paint jobs. In the countryside, the same material is collected as a valuable nitrogen-rich fertilizer. Depending on your standpoint, this is waste or resource, nuisance or nourishment.

While Eisenman's indexical project brought the notion of the trace of the past into architecture (and birdshit is certainly an index of the bird's former presence), can the trace of the future be embedded into our present? Rather than hiding our waste in the feel-good realm of single-stream recycling, and designing buildings out of materials yet to be defined, can we think of our building's dismantling in our designs? As the EPA slowly disappears, can we think about the waste for which we designers are responsible, and the future resource that it could be if properly considered?

Can we talk about shit?

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#### **Contact**

[www.pidgin.princeton.edu](http://www.pidgin.princeton.edu)  
[pidgin@princeton.edu](mailto:pidgin@princeton.edu)

#### **Pidgin Magazine**

School of Architecture  
Princeton University  
S-110 Architecture Building  
Princeton, NJ 08544-5264

#### **Editors**

Clemens Finkelstein  
Ryan Hughes  
José Ibarra  
Leen Katrib  
Sheila Lin  
Jamie Lipson  
Anna Renken  
Camila Reyes Alé  
Kyle Schumann

#### **Typography**

Arnhem and Avenir Next

#### **Printing**

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