

Joshua Tan in Conversation With Eric Wycoff Rogers

In *Paprika!* Issue 01, Eric Wycoff Rogers (MED '15) wrote passionately about Major and Minor architecture, seeking to liberate the “spatial monopolies” that “hierarchical and planned institutions” have imposed on our use of urban space.¹ Almost seven years later, Eric is completing a PhD in American History at Cambridge after experimenting with several projects aimed to change the public perception and usage of space. This Dispatch discusses how their aspirations, challenges and beliefs have changed after working on these projects and joining academia.

“Do you still see architecture operating primarily within the “Major”?”

In many ways, it does seem like the overblown concept of the Great Architect is still with us. *But it's also worth remembering that architects don't really design most of the spaces that we inhabit.* Architectural culture is pretty insular. My interest in the Minor is very much inspired by Keller Easterling's writings on the various rules, dynamics and apparatuses that generate the built environment. So, in recent years, I've become increasingly preoccupied with the way that mainstream spatial styles and aesthetics (often witnessed on YouTube and social media platforms created by people who are not architects) dominate our imagination of what a desirable space should look and feel like, creating its own version of the Major. Here, Major exists not as architectural output, but as trends. Think, for example, of the “bohemian modernism” that, in the last decade, has replaced the beige suburban Pier 1 Imports look of the 2000s. Notably, it perpetuates itself without architects. It's a self-perpetuating style; an aesthetic; but also a shared ethos and sensibility. *I think a lot about how these aesthetics limit how we think of ourselves, and how we feel our present and sense possibilities for the future.*

What were the successes/challenges of the start-ups/initiatives you created?

When I returned to San Francisco in 2015 from Yale, I split my time between three experiments: participating in the communal living subculture that continues to thrive in San Francisco and beyond; setting up an “urban hacking” events-based Facebook group called Spontaneum; and founding a space-sharing app start-up called Nookzy.

Spontaneum was a great experiment in the contingency of meanings and functions of urban interstitial spaces. We were really inspired by Jeremy Till's *Architecture Depends*, Douglas Rushkoff's *Program or Be Programmed*, and Andrew Herscher's *Unreal Estate Guide to Detroit*. We started inviting people to join us for communal dinner in alleyways in Chinatown and under freeway overpasses. We set up temporary push evening lounges between stacked shipping containers on San Francisco's deserted Treasure Island, and in the negative space in the center of a spiraling pedestrian ramp near Twin Peaks. We found little interstitial spaces that we could inject functionality, excitement and culture into.

The goal was to emphasize the contingency of urban spaces, and to demonstrate the latent potentiality and abundance that saturated the city. *In a world where anything can be anything, the drab, desolate scarcities and harshness of the urban environment suddenly appear as what they really are: contingent social constructs.*

Lastly, Nookzy was a parallel experiment I did in collaboration with a friend, Justin Alameida. The idea was to create bookable micro-environments (which we called “nooks”), such as a small, tropical greenhouses; little sailboat hangouts; rooftop Zen gardens; waterfront saunas; tucked-away little hot tubs; little underground labyrinths that you can only access through an unassuming manhole; treehouses; etc (some of those are fictional). They would be created and “hosted”—much like Airbnb—by people who had formal tenure of these spaces.

The idea here was to make the user experience of the city more multi-faceted. We were finding with our spontaneous experiments that much of the city's potential just never gets tapped into. We initially set our sights on backyards, which are one of the least utilized urban spaces in existence, especially in the United States. This is especially so on the west coast where they're usable all year. So we rolled out a small campaign to get people to host bookable hot tubs with cozy lighting in a handful of San Francisco and Oakland backyards. The pilot experiment was moderately successful, but early on, we ran into the conundrum that we couldn't get a modular insurance policy when we only had five hosts and were just trying it out. Without this, it became ethically dubious because we would be subjecting our hosts to liability. And without hosts demonstrating in real life, it was difficult to demonstrate to angel investors that they should back us, so we pressed pause on the project.

Unfortunately, as I realized how much of a commitment and compromise the venture was going to need to be in order to get off the ground, I leaned more into academia, but I'm still hoping some aspiring CEO with a radical vision for better cities will come take the reins. *It's going to take someone who's not just spatially savvy, but also has business know-how, and is committed to experimental place making and true radical sharing.*

After the challenges of working on Nookzy, did it make “hacking” feel like a strategy that was fundamentally disadvantaged?

It depends. “Hacking” is the basis of startup culture in general. Startups have proven to go from zero to a million quite quickly. That's what distinguishes them from small businesses. The hacker toolkit is a really valuable and scalable one. What's harder is when you have an intention other than making a shitload of money. That becomes trickier—when you are building things because the world needs it or because it's going to make the world more interesting, meaningful or fair. I think that's always going to be a smuggling operation—as in: smuggling other goals into the business enterprise form; perhaps even using business to accelerate alternatives ↗ ↗ ↗

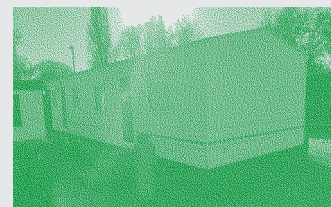
→ → → to capitalism. *You're always going to have to be creative and kind of scrappy about how you pull that off.*

What are some contemporary examples of “flying under the radar” or “active forms” that you see being successful? And how do you see being an academic playing into this?

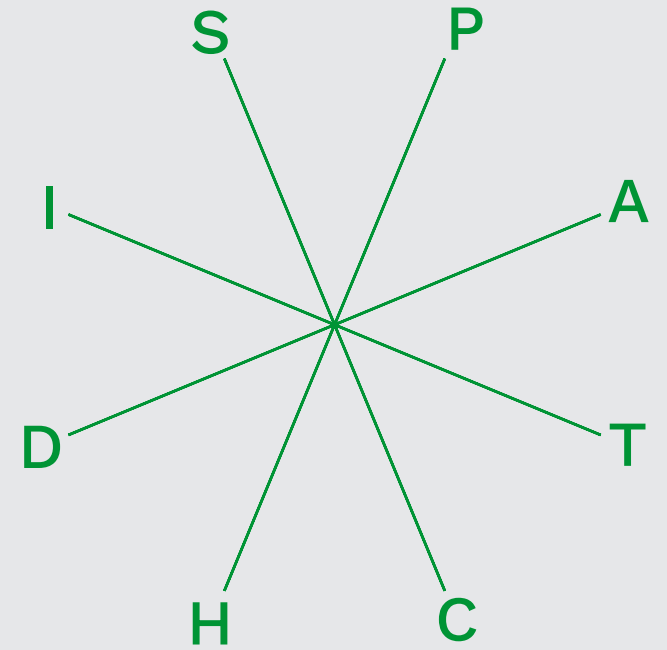
I was really inspired by Peggy Deamer's call to arms in her New York Times letter to the editor, where she says we are ready to “fly under the radar to infiltrate larger spheres of influence” (Peggy was my M.E.D. thesis advisor). One way I see this being done successfully is by creating frames through which we might think about and view architecture, urban space and socio-spatial behaviors. I'm thinking about terms like “sprawl” or a song about “little boxes” made of “tacky,” that can catalyze a whole generation's feelings about suburbia.

Lately, I've been interested in Mark Fisher's idea of the “weird,” and imagining a spatial practice that seeks to create spaces and experiences that “defamiliarize”—in a Situationist fashion—the everyday, habituated built environment by injecting unexpected and jarring events, occurrences, and/or scenery in them. Suddenly, the everyday becomes pregnant with latent, radically-different scenarios and potentiality, and one seeks pathways and portals leading between the ordinary and the extraordinary. I love contemplating this.

Another way I think academia can be quite productive is through creating design prompts. I've recently teamed up with my friend and collaborator Andra Bria to host what we've been calling the “Post-Work City Project.” It's basically inviting artists, architects, designers and lay people to imagine/design/represent what cities can be like in a future where production is automated, and people no longer need to work to sustain themselves. We're less interested in planning a future than unsettling the obvious givenness of the present which grips and limits our imaginations, and prevents us from feeling or believing that things could be otherwise. ●



We ended our conversation talking about the trailer park where Eric lives. Their unconventional choice of habitation seemed to be representative of their visions for a radically different spatial future. Their workspace was lit by neon lights and unsynced digital clocks, creating an aesthetic that was uniquely theirs. A variety of machines, monitors, cables and speakers surrounded them perhaps suggestive of what the interiors of Archigram's “Plug-In City” would look like. We jokingly made snipes at professors that have written critically about domestication and family, but have turned out to live in suburban houses with completely traditional gender roles. It made me wonder whether a different future—one that is more “interesting, meaningful or fair”—would first require architects and designers to examine how we perpetuate the conventions of today. Are we brave enough to go beyond the written and the drawn? ■



Letter from the Editors

Dear reader,

As we enter our eleventh month of a (semi-)virtual Yale School of Architecture, we're no longer just thinking reactively but also looking to a future that requires even more endurance and patience. This is a future we find difficult to plan for amidst constantly fluctuating restrictions, provisional schedules, and uncertain access. For us, as the coordinating editors of *Paprika!* this semester, planning for the future begins with confronting the “now” within a long, slow pandemic. Working within a compressed semester schedule and at a distance from many of our peers, we hope to continue fostering thoughtful discussion and action within our school and beyond by grounding the Spring 2021 installment of *Paprika!* Volume 6 in the ideas of slowness and compounding conversations.

Slowness

Recognizing the psychological endurance required amidst an ongoing pandemic, we see slowness as a guiding principle for our work, allowing us to mirror the change in pace we've experienced over the past few months and expect we will continue to experience. By slowing down, we hope to offer editors, contributors, and readers more time to think, respond, and write—in contrast with the typically fast-paced nature of *Paprika!* We believe slowness is an opportunity to look back and look forward, to act and imagine with intention.

In pursuit of this slowness, we are reducing the number of issues we will publish this semester and introducing a new format—the dispatch—that will be interspersed between issues. We envision the dispatch as a platform that compounds and prompts dialogues not only between issues, but also between contributors and readers. Each dispatch will be a curated collection including diverse formats (such as article responses, op-ed pieces, images, and videos) that hopefully captures thoughts and conversations that might fall outside the thematic boundaries of issues. As a complement to the issues we publish, dispatches will provide an opportunity for readers to review *Paprika!* retrospectively and re-examine its role within our school and beyond.

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1. <https://yalepaprika.com/folds/issue-01/major-versus-minor-architecture>

