

# CALENDAR

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## ARCHITECTURE

# Retrofitting form and function

Houses? Apprenticeships with big firms? For a crop of young designers, the way of the future is something more amorphous: fabrication.

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IT'S tempting to call any young company that works on a small scale the "garage band" of its genre — but in the case of one Echo Park architecture firm, it's almost literally the case. Benjamin Ball and Gaston Nogues — both scruffy, intellectually driven young designers — really work out of a garage: In a space filled with electric saws, lathes and sanders and next to a home cantina that pokes out of a neighbor's house, they hack through plywood and dream up concepts as they blast Internet radio.

Unlike most young Los Angeles architects, they are rarely designing houses.

"There's a lot of work out there for innovative design that's not exactly architectural but that's architectural in its preoccupations and architectural in scale," says the blond, vintage-clad Ball. "Exhibition design, installations, events, sets. That's the wave we're riding now."

This kind of work allows them to retain more creative freedom than peers who are drafting shelter projects, says Nogues, a lanky, cap-wearing Argentine who once designed furniture for Frank Gehry. And that's a good thing: "We're both," Nogues says, "obsessive-compulsive control freaks."

Mavericks though they are, Ball, 37, and Nogues, 38, are part of a larger movement of young, tech-savvy designers who have skipped the traditional paths for Southland architects — a long apprenticeship at a big firm or decades of designing homes, then the slow building of reputation in late middle age — and moved into an alternative path called fabrication.

This involves designing objects as small, and practical, as the prototype for a watch and as large, and whimsical, as a wide, funnel-shaped canopy of tinted Mylar meant to emulate a black hole that Ball and Nogues put together for an outdoor space in Silver Lake last summer. In the same spirit, there was the groovy bar-reception desk the firm Gnuform designed for a Beverly Hills cable TV station, and the serpentine exhibition design for "Dark Places," the current Santa Monica Museum of Art show, rendered by the globe-trotting architecture collective servo.

Their work, these breakaway architects say, isn't just about making products or museum pieces but defining spaces or designing new ways to construct familiar objects. It's a twilight zone between sculpture and architecture.

There have always been architects interested in breaking through the field's hierarchical structure, whether out of simple restlessness or to realize their own vision. What's new, says Charles Lagreco, associate dean of USC's architecture school, is a new wave of technology that is "transforming the field," and that allows some practitioners to control their work as well as their destiny.

The stars of this movement are mostly New York-educated designers in their middle 30s who came to L.A. and took advantage of the region's concentration of digital technology, Hollywood set facilities and auto and aerospace technology.

Like nonconformists in any field, they sometimes express a disdain for their more conventional peers. Ball, a former set designer, points to fellow SCI-Arc grads who landed jobs with big firms but have "taken about 10 years to design anything that's an expression of their interests . . . There are people in our classes who are drafting toilets now."

While they differ in manner — the stocky, cigar-chomping Hernan Diaz Alonso resembles a mad scientist, servo's David Erdman is cerebral and hip, Gnuform's Heather Roberge is crisply academic and rail thin — they all talk about creative freedom, about sticking to work that's "research-based," about their fascination with unusual materials. They're also keenly aware of one another's work.

Not surprisingly, they are not all beloved.

"If you ask other architects about these people, they hate 'em," says Greg Lynn, 41, who taught many of the fabricators and remains a kind of elder brother. "Hate 'em, hate 'em. They're self-promoting, using technology to get famous, have academic affiliations . . . and so on. You hear complaints about them from the country-doctor-type architects. What's encouraging is that they haven't killed each other — they still remain friends and competitors."

### Quicker out of the chute

ARCHITECTURE may seem increasingly glamorous, even youthfully cool, to the culture at large, but most of the field's really successful practitioners are over 50 — in some cases well over. The years between graduation and late middle age can be a hard road, and the profession has a history of eating its young.



OPENING DOORS: Benjamin Ball, right, with Gaston Nogues, says, "There's a lot of work out there for innovative design that's not exactly architectural."



FRONTIER: Marcelo Spina says L.A. is ripe for fabrication due to its "lack of architectural history and conventions."

"There's this horrible thing that happens to an architect," says Jenna Didier, 36, a willowy fountain designer based in Silver Lake. "They have all these wonderful, beautiful ideas. But they get out of school and go through a hazing process: It squelches their creativity and anything that was ever interesting about them."

To fill this awkward gap in an architect's traditional career path, Didier and 33-year-old partner Oliver Hess, who exudes a monk-like calm, put on exhibits by some of these young designers at an outdoor space along Silver Lake Boulevard. She calls Materials & Applications, as it's known, a showcase for "the frustrated artist inside every architect." The first exhibit was by the fabricator Marcelo Spina, 35, who teaches at SCI-Arc; the most recent was Ball and Nogues' Mylar vortex, "Maximilian Schell." (A new installation, "Here There Be Monsters," involving water and a bamboo footbridge, went up last week at M&A's location at 1619 Silver Lake Blvd.)

M&A's space is not the only outlet for fabricators: Architects have been doing fabrication, one way or the other, for decades. (Gehry, whose rise to prominence came when he designed his own Santa Monica house in the late '70s, also worked in exhibition design.)

What's new is that the rise of digital technology, and the infrastructure of industry in place in the Southland, makes it a feasible way not just to channel creative energy but to build a career. It's also allowed ambitious architects to reach outside the straight-line bounds of the form. "What in architecture seemed very alien was not so strange in the worlds of car design or movies or airplanes," says Diaz Alonso, 36, who is best known for an almost science-fictional sculpture installed last year in the courtyard of New York's P.S. 1. (Fittingly, he grew up wanting to be a filmmaker and is interested in "the

beauty of the grotesque.") "I always thought architecture was about form and geometry, so this was a natural evolution for me," since digital fabrication is "not so much based on Cartesian order but on other rules — on motion and other things."

Another factor in the emergence of this band was the struggle of universities to keep up with increasingly important design software. "There was this gap in the academy," says Roberge, 35, who runs South Pasadena's Gnuform with Jason Payne, 34. And these younger architects stepped in "because there were not older, more established professors able to teach these emerging technologies."

Teaching earlier — most of these fabricators have positions at UCLA, SCI-Arc or Columbia University — not only frees up an architect to do noncommercial work but orients even a very young designer toward independence, she says. Old-fashioned dues paying, as an apprentice in a large firm, suddenly makes less sense.

So might the other most common route: forming a residential firm soon after graduation, which can ensnare even the most imaginative. Says Lynn: "To build up a small practice in L.A. is a real trap, because there are so many houses to build. Once you do 20 houses, you're a residential architect. And the museums don't call you. The concert halls don't call you."

That makes it hard, says Lynn, to get where most ambitious architects are trying to go. "It's most satisfying to have an effect on the public realm — deep down I think it's what every architect wants to do."

Los Angeles architects have typically defined themselves through residential architecture, and the house has long been used by auteurist architects here to create works of art. Richard Neutra, R.M. Schindler and Charles and Ray Eames did much of their most distinc-

tive work with single-family homes, and the most famous experimental series in L.A. history was the Case Study House project. That makes the flourishing of fabrication here, of all places, striking.

Erdman, who holds down the Santa Monica office of servo's far-flung design operation, sees his work in the lineage of risk-taking Southland architects Gehry, Thom Mayne and Eric Owen Moss. "There's a legacy here of pushing traditions," he says, "innovating through the explicit resources of L.A. and finding other languages of architecture to play with. Traditionally that's been done through the house." But servo launched its reputation largely through gallery installations.

To Spina, a boyish, goateed Argentine native, Los Angeles is defined by "the lack of architectural history and conventions" that would inhibit these "new forms of making." The city, instead, he says, "could be more open to embracing those possibilities."

His work — all the way back to "Land Tiles," a 24-by-16-foot cast-concrete "micro-environment," with water running through it, that grew grass and moss over six months at M&A in '03 — involves precision and letting nature take its course. The pieces were vacuum-formed, or shaped, at Warner Bros. film studio, a popular spot for the fabricators, and routed at SCI-Arc, where Spina teaches.

"I'm interested in using the most advanced technology," he says, "where you control every bit of geometry as well as [allowing for] the indeterminacy of the material."

And the Southland is a good place for it, he says, since artists or set designers have needed almost every conceivable material cut or shaped: The resulting local cottage industry has few parallels.

In some ways, fabrication has begun to replace another route to success for the young architect: competitions and journals. These are easy to get access to



TECHNO EDGE: At Gnuform, Heather Roberge and Jason Payne.

in New York and European capitals but harder in Southern California.

This distance from the architecture establishment can be an advantage. "Your career is more philanthropically guided on the East Coast," says Lynn. "But they make stuff out here."

### Success still a gray area

AT this point, the fabricators are just starting to build reputations outside the academy. Their firms are still quite new, and they have yet to get the big civic commissions that make an architect's name and fortune. Gallery installations can serve as seeds for similar, if more lucrative, commercial work, such as the exhibition space servo did for Nike on the Venice boardwalk. And most of these companies take some residential jobs if they find the right client. But some are still enduring lean months for the sake of creative freedom.

Both Lynn and USC's Lagreco compare these designers to the New York Five (which includes Peter Eisenman, Michael Graves, Charles Gwathmey, John Hejduk and Richard Meier), a group of architects who exhibited together in 1969, shared some Corbusian principles and did some of their own construction to get work built.

Will these thirtysomething fabricators become intellectual dilettantes, or will they have a real impact on the field and the city? It's too soon to tell for sure, but their importance in architecture education is not likely to change. "I think the need to keep young people in the academy to keep up with technology will persist," says Roberge, who knows just-graduated architects who already have teaching gigs.

Ball cautions that his peers have to overcome a fetishistic fascination with technology. Some young fabricators, he says, "are so computer-oriented they don't even know how to hold a hammer. A designer's 'hand' is always going to be interesting: Ten years ago there was a lot of techno on the rave scene that sounds terrible now because it was all made with digital tools. Now it's trending back."

Whether architecture trends back similarly or not, Lagreco calls the fabrication path a healthy development. "I feel it's quite within the tradition of architecture as a discipline," he says. "It might threaten certain kinds of established professional points of view — but ultimately it enriches and reinvents what we do."