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# THE ARCHITECT'S NEWSPAPER

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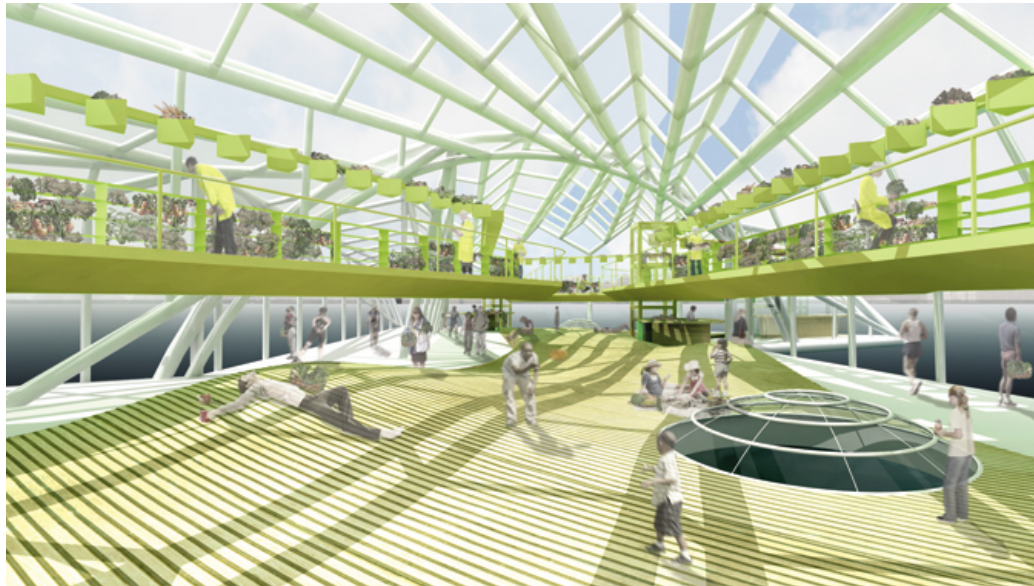


## NEWS

07.07.2010

### The Kids Are All Right

Preferring hands-on building to paper-architecture ponderings, a new generation of emerging architects are weathering the recession with creativity, grit, and good form.



A SLOWER WORKLOAD HAS ALLOWED NEW YORK-BASED PHU HOANG OFFICE TO PURSUE LARGE-SCALE RESEARCH PROJECTS SUCH AS *FOODOPOLIS*, A PROPOSAL FOR INTERLOCKING GREENHOUSES ALONG THE WATERFRONT. COURTESY PHU HOANG OFFICE

How do you find free housing in New York? Answer: Pretend to be homeless, clean houses, turn tricks, or provide childcare.

For the principals of Fake Industries Architectural Agonism, questions like these have architectural implications, especially during the downturn. Such unconventional thinking has been an asset for younger firms as they have weathered the last two years.

The Great Recession has hit architecture harder than almost any other profession. Small firms with the least fat to trim are inevitably some of the most vulnerable. But as *AN* found out through interviews with young architects selected primarily from the roster of recent AIA New York New Practices winners and Architectural League Young Architects honorees, many emerging firms have been highly enterprising and nimble in adapting to the times. No one is sitting on his or her hands, waiting for the old economy to come roaring back to life.

Not surprisingly, many of these firms balance teaching with practice, and many principals have been spending more time at school to make ends meet. Some firms have had to reduce staffing, but most have maintained their already lean offices.

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For DUMBO-based Manifold Architecture Studio, the shifting tastes of clients was an opportunity to rethink a classic New York building typology. Co-principal Philipp von Dalwig's firm has seen many of its residential clients jump the East River to take advantage of the downturn and buy whole brownstones in Brooklyn. Formerly favoring downtown lofts, these clients didn't want to trade sleek surfaces and open plans for narrow Victorian interiors. "It's been a productive investigation," the architect said. "How to import a loft into a brownstone, how to open it up." Beyond custom work, Manifold has also created [downloadable plans](#) for a modern house for the website Hometta.com. They hope to both generate sales and increase the firm's visibility. German by birth, von Dalwig is also able to take advantage of Europe's vast system of architectural competitions, which allows the firm to think and work through larger projects. "They're a good training run. After a while you get to be good at certain typologies," he said.

Access to the European competition system has also been a boon for Fake. They see their New York office as a research arm and Europe as the place where they build. Principals Cristina Goberna and Urtzi Grau, both Spanish-born, are building or masterplanning several projects in Spain won in competitions.

Building on their research into "free" housing, Fake has designed and built two secret, illegal apartments, one in a warehouse and one in an office building, deliberately thumbing their noses at zoning restrictions. The House for Cesar conceals a loft bed, kitchen area, and closets behind a translucent wall that could easily pass for an office partition. Located in a commercial office building, the client lives and works in the space, having lost his home. Addressing legitimate low-cost housing needs, the projects capture Fake's irreverent spirit to a tee.



LOFT MEETS BROWNSTONE BY MANIFOLD ARCHITECTURE STUDIO.

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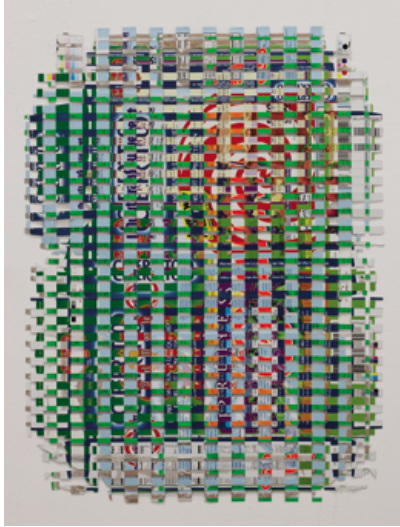


THE HOUSE FOR CESAR, BY FAKE INDUSTRIES ARCHITECTURAL AGONISM, STEMMED FROM THE FIRM'S RESEARCH INTO "FREE" HOUSING. THE PROJECT PROVIDES A LIVING SPACE CONCEALED WITHIN A COMMERCIAL OFFICE BUILDING.

COURTESY FAKE

While many firms are spending more time on research and writing projects, this work differs from the paper architecture boom of the 1970s and early '80s. "It's not about formalism, or a critique of where architecture is today," said Todd Rouhe, a principal at IdS/R and co-founder of Common Room, a practice on the Lower East Side. In addition to the renovation of Artists Space among other built projects, Common Room has launched a publishing imprint, Common Books, and founded a New York chapter of an art-based community school called the Public School. For Common Room, the social, historical, and community functions of architecture—both as built work and as theoretical investigation—are as important as formal concerns. "There's a reserved nature to the gestures we make," Rouhe said. "We want the user to complete the work. It's not predetermined."





**TOP:** ANDREW ZAGO'S ELEVATION STUDIES, MADE OF CUT-AND-TILED PRODUCT BOXES, HAVE PROVEN A HIT A BENEFIT AUCTIONS.  
**ABOVE:** HIS FIRM'S EXPERIMENTS WITH 3-D FORM-MAKING INCLUDE CHANDELIER MODELED ON THE IMPERFECT FORMS OF ROCK CRYSTAL CANDY.  
 COURTESY ZAGO ARCHITECTURE

Pursuing more artistic R&D than theoretical critiques, Detroit- and LA-based architect Andrew Zago is participating in an experimental fundraising and social network platform soon to be launched by United States Artists, where visitors to the website can contribute funds to support the creation of specific works by some 64 artists and designers. Zago's project challenges current ideas about 3-D digital form-making software by growing a chandelier modeled on the beautiful imperfections of rock crystal candy. His elevation studies of cut-and-tilled product boxes have been selling successfully enough at benefit auctions to encourage the architect to contemplate a gallery exhibition.

For Phu Hoang, principal of Phu Hoang Office, a slower workload has allowed his firm to pursue large-scale research projects such as the proposal *Foodopolis*, a *Rising Currents*-meets-locavore scheme that would suspend an interlocking series of greenhouses in a space-frame-like structure over the edge of the waterfront. For all the scheme's eye-appeal, Hoang doesn't want it to be seen as purely visionary. "We believe putting the ideas out there will help us find clients," Hoang said. Thanks to his participation in Young Architects, his firm has been included in several invited competitions, two of which they have won.

For Matter Practice, fabrication and design/build projects have helped them survive the recession. The longer duration of these highly customized projects, as well as capturing design and construction fees, have kept the firm busy. In addition, their interest in fabrication—and the additional time on their hands—led them to apply for and receive a grant from the New York State Council on the Arts for a project entitled *Tolerance in Architectural Production*. The project explores the imperfections that sometimes arise when premade, prefabricated elements meet real-world construction and on-the-ground conditions.

Similarly, Williamsburg, Brooklyn-based Tacklebox, a firm with extensive experience designing retail environments, took the slowdown as an opportunity to take on their first design/build project, a [florist and handmade soap shop](#) in Red Hook, Brooklyn, made from reclaimed barn lumber. In the same vein, through their connections to the fashion industry, Tacklebox launched a line of scarves and satchels under the name Box & Flea, working with fashion designer Andrew Woodrum. The accessories line has introduced them to store owners and

fashion designers, some of whom are discussing new jobs with Tacklebox. "It works both ways. Box & Flea has the same sense of craft and timelessness as our architecture," principal Jeremy Barbour said.

Easton+Combs is using their expertise in light structures—developed through competitions like MoMA PS1's Young Architects Program—to improve conditions for victims of the Haitian earthquake. "We wanted to be effective, not just make another proposal," principal Lonn Combs told *AN* by phone from Haiti. Working with a group of architects including Haitian-born Rodney Leon who had local knowledge and access to a site, Combs and his collaborators began raising money to build a series of demonstration temporary structures called the Haiti SOFTHOUSE. Two will be built in the next couple of weeks, followed by 15 or 20 more during the summer. The simple structures, built by a Chicago-area awning and trade-show booth company, are covered in colored fabric that could be upgraded with hard panels for more permanent housing or community uses. "We call them trans-permanent structures. You have the option to build it out or combine multiple structures for different programs," Combs said. "We're always looking at economically efficient ways to work through our material research."



EASTON+COMBS' HAITI SOFTHOUSE, BASED ON THE FIRM'S ENTRIES TO COMPETITIONS LIKE MOMA PS1'S YOUNG ARCHITECTS PROGRAM, IS CURRENTLY BEING DEVELOPED WITH A NUMBER OF U.S.- AND HAITI-BASED COLLABORATORS. COURTESY SOFTHOUSEGROUP

If architects of previous generations used economic downturns to enrich theoretical discussions and develop new formal languages that were spoken primarily within the academy, today's younger practitioners seem drawn to combining thinking with making, extending architecture into new disciplines and real-world applications. Many of these self-starters are working outside traditional architect/client relationships, stretching the role of the profession into new social, artistic, or entrepreneurial directions. In the digital age, it seems that image-making alone is not enough. "Today, paper architecture is seen as the more conservative stance. People are just less interested in that," Zago said. "What one can get built is now the most radical investigation in architecture."

Alan G. Brake

**Alan G. Brake is the editor of AN's Midwest edition.**