

# GUGGENHEIM BILBAO

## Skipping the Manifesto: Introducing the Practices of Didier Fúza Faustino, MOS Architects, Frida Escobedo, MA10, and Leong Leong

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Cultural theorist and architectural historian Charles Jencks visually delineated dominant architectural trends in a series of “Evolutionary Tree” diagrams, the first of which attempted to chart the entire twentieth century, distilling movements and architects into clusters within six major forces that ebb and flow into one another. Jencks makes distinctions between Corporate Modernism (Henri Ciriani, César Pelli, and Kenzō Tange) and Modern Classicism (Kohn Pedersen Fox, Robert A. M. Stern, and Skidmore, Owings & Merrill) and likens Frank Gehry to Daniel Libeskind and Greg Lynn in a category labeled Biomorphic.<sup>1</sup> The diagram identifies commonalities among firms while also directly charting their relationship to the history of the field. Jencks’s noted and influential analysis is representative of the

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Jencks, “Jencks’s Theory of Evolution: An Overview of Twentieth-Century Architecture,” *The Architectural Review* (July 2000), pp. 76–79.

way architecture is classified by historians and practitioners alike. There is a strong desire to position contemporary practices within the historic trajectory of architecture, identifying direct influences and biases. Concurrently, there is pressure to publicly declare the intention and commitment behind a practice. The manifesto may have had its heyday in the twentieth century, but using manifestos as the organizing principle behind biennials, curriculums, and symposiums is still commonplace. Whether it is a dedication to sustainability or material innovation, a pledge to only craft designs that can be boiled down to simple, widely accessible diagrams, or resolutely employing a recognizable formal language, architects are expected to articulate a persistent methodology. For some, prescribing a specific process or agenda to their practice is not the point; there are a number of practices that do not identify with established architectural camps or focus on building a body of work that is easily recognizable. The distinct practices of Didier Fiúza Faustino, MOS , Frida Escobedo, MAIO, and Leong Leong describe themselves in similar ways, claiming to not have a fixed methodology, but instead a consistent ethos and culture that runs through their work.

Didier Fiúza Faustino likes to reference the X-Files tagline “The truth is out there” when he approaches a conversation with a client as a way to establish that the unique circumstances and constraints of each project determine his work more than visual consistency or personal style.<sup>2</sup> The French-Portuguese architect and artist knew that he needed to found his own practice right out of architecture school in 1995. His firm’s name has shifted over time, first Laboratoire d’Architecture Performance et Sabotage [Laboratory of Performance and

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<sup>2</sup> Christophe Le Gac and Aurélien Gillier, “Didier Fiúza Faustino: The Architecture Project as a Strategy,” PCA-Stream | Philippe Chiambaretta Architecte (2008), [www.pca-stream.com/en/articles/the-architecture-project-as-a-strategy-82](http://www.pca-stream.com/en/articles/the-architecture-project-as-a-strategy-82).

Sabotage Architecture] and later Bureau des Mésarchitectures [Office of Misarchitectures]. These enigmatic names were chosen as a way to position his practice without overly defining a clear overarching strategy. Faustino's architecture comprises not his designed objects but rather the situations generated through active engagement with those objects. Therefore, the consistent material in Faustino's work is the human body. For him, each work, whether it be a chair or a performance, occupiable or sculptural, is a piece of architecture. Rather than thinking of a chair as an ergonomic device, he thinks of it actively—as an object that makes users aware of their circumstances.<sup>3</sup> This is clear with *Love Me Tender* (2000), a chair whose sharply spiked legs leave an imprint on the ground via the weight of a person, as well as both the *Hermaphrodite* (2010) and *Delete Yourself* (2016) chairs, which are purposefully difficult to sit on. Sitting is typically almost a subconscious act, but Faustino's chairs force people to consciously negotiate and consider their relationship with these designed objects. The products of his practice are subversive: at once alien and familiar, an intentional ambiguous dichotomy.

"The vaguely familiar" is a phrase that Michael Meredith and Hilary Sample, principals of MOS, use to describe their work. "We're unconcerned with producing radical newness or shocking originality. Instead we'd rather define a space that is neither new nor completely referential."<sup>4</sup> They founded their New York City-based practice in 2003, but do not like to decisively point to that date. Their work extends from houses, schools, and cultural institutions to software experiments, furniture,

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<sup>3</sup> Marianna Guernieri, "Didier Fiúza Faustino: "My Work Is That of Introducing Doubt in Space," *Domus*, June 1, 2018, [www.domusweb.it/en/architecture/2018/06/01/didier-fiuza-faustino-my-work-is-that-of-introducing-doubt-in-space.html](http://www.domusweb.it/en/architecture/2018/06/01/didier-fiuza-faustino-my-work-is-that-of-introducing-doubt-in-space.html).

<sup>4</sup> Esther Choi, "Interview with MOS Architects," *PIN UP*, August 18, 2016, pp. 134–46.

books, writing, video, and houseware. For MOS, producing houseware objects, temporary installations, prototypes, models, and drawings for biennials is not promotional or simply experimentation. Working across scales helps MOS reframe architecture for themselves.

Their recently published book *An Unfinished Encyclopedia of Scale Figures without Architecture* (2018) catalogues the scale figures used by architects across the discipline.

Sample reflects that in school she was encouraged not to include scale figures in her drawings, but that MOS now “overly-populate”<sup>5</sup> their drawings. This distinction reflects that like Faustino, a specific attention to the human body is present through MOS’s work; there is a cinematic quality to their elaborate drawings. This is often summed up as “playful”—which they embrace, but Meredith points out: “Humor is always very context-based.”<sup>6</sup> Sensitivity to context combined with a level of openness and pliability has materialized in the form of a double concrete frame designed to withstand seismic activity in Nepal for their Lali Gurans Orphanage (2017), the thatched chimney “perpetual breeze-making machine”<sup>7</sup> Afterparty (2009) that sustained MoMA PS1 partygoers through New York City’s summer heat, and a house that floats atop steel pontoons and moves with the seasonal variation of Lake Huron, aptly named Floating House (2005). There is a refreshing specificity with each and every project: from building to coat hook.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Stewart Hicks, “Michael Meredith Wants to Be Horizontal and Fuzzy,” *The Miami Rail*, November 28, 2017, [miamirail.org/issue-22/michael-meredith-wants-to-be-horizontal-and-fuzzy](http://miamirail.org/issue-22/michael-meredith-wants-to-be-horizontal-and-fuzzy).

<sup>7</sup> MOS Architects, “Pavilion, No. 4, MoMA PS1, Afterparty,” [www.mos.nyc/project/moma-ps1-afterparty](http://www.mos.nyc/project/moma-ps1-afterparty).

When asked to describe her style, Frida Escobedo said, "I wouldn't say it's a style: I'd say you have a set of preoccupations that shape your drive."<sup>8</sup> The complexity of Mexico City-based architect Escobedo's designs is balanced by the locally sourced, raw materials and simple geometries with which she works. Since founding her practice in 2006, Escobedo's work has ranged from housing, community centers, and gallery spaces to temporary pavilions and deeply researched art installations. Specificity to context is central to her practice, which made designing the 2018 Serpentine Pavilion, intended to be temporarily located in central London before moving to an unknown permanent location, a particular conundrum. As Escobedo put it, her challenge was to "anchor it to space, but also make it spaceless."<sup>9</sup> Ultimately she chose to make the pavilion an expression of time on multiple levels: the walls of the inner courtyard run parallel to the invisible line of the prime meridian, and by focusing on human experience within the pavilion Escobedo used light and shadow as a way to heighten the awareness of the passage of time within the space. The walls of the pavilion are a lattice constructed from undulating concrete roofing tiles, the texture of which has an immediate relationship with the sun, heightened further with reflecting mirror and pool elements. Instead of defining her practice or embracing a specific label, Escobedo would ultimately "like to be a congruous person, a person that is aware of the time and place she lives in."<sup>10</sup> The Serpentine Pavilion fully expresses that sentiment, the seemingly simple structure, composed of two rectangular volumes,

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<sup>8</sup> Taylor Weik, "A Day in the Life: Frida Escobedo." *Kinfolk*, March 1, 2016, [www.kinfolk.com/a-day-in-the-life-frida-escobedo](http://www.kinfolk.com/a-day-in-the-life-frida-escobedo).

<sup>9</sup> Amy Frearson, "Frida Escobedo Builds Serpentine Pavilion Featuring 'Woven Tapestry' of Concrete Tiles," *Dezeen*, June 11, 2018, [www.dezeen.com/2018/06/11/frida-escobedo-serpentine-pavilion-2018-woven-tapestry-concrete-tiles](http://www.dezeen.com/2018/06/11/frida-escobedo-serpentine-pavilion-2018-woven-tapestry-concrete-tiles).

<sup>10</sup> Kate Walker, "Six Questions for Frida Escobedo—The Architect Who Doesn't Ascribe to Architectural Trends," *Design Indaba*, October 22, 2015, [www.designindaba.com/articles/point-view/six-questions-frida-escobedo-architect-who-doesnt-ascribe-architectural-trends](http://www.designindaba.com/articles/point-view/six-questions-frida-escobedo-architect-who-doesnt-ascribe-architectural-trends).

simultaneously relates to the history and memory of its site, the movement and mapping of people globally and a visceral experience of temporality.

It has been noted that the Barcelona-based practice MAIO's use of "millennial pink" is very of-the-moment, but cofounder Anna Puigjaner attributes that identifiable aspect of their work to financial constraints, noting that "color is cheap," and therefore using color "is a reaction to our time."<sup>11</sup> The practice was founded in 2011 at the height of the economic crisis in Spain by María Charneco, Alfredo Lérida, Guillermo López, and Puigjaner. That circumstance has shaped the practice aesthetically and procedurally. The crisis forced the architects to share their workspace, which ultimately has fostered interdisciplinary collaboration and consistent parallel practices. Until recently the MAIO members coedited the quarterly architecture journal *Quaderns d'arquitectura i urbanisme* with José Zabala and Ethel Baraona,<sup>12</sup> which they believe helped them not only learn how to edit and write but to define formats and structure. This clearly feeds into their practice, which they characterize as based in "spatial systems." Whether they are working at the scale of a building, an installation, or an article, they always design a system of rules that "allow things to happen and change through time."<sup>13</sup> Thinking about design as a series of rules enables MAIO to both work within and question the boundaries of codes and norms. With *110 Rooms* (2016), a 22-unit apartment building, exhaustive research enabled them to find loopholes in the building codes, which led them to design truly interchangeable rooms. MAIO eliminated spatial hierarchy within the structure by splitting each apartment into

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<sup>11</sup> Nicholas Korody, "A House Without a Hierarchy," *Ed 1* (November 2017), pp. 8–27.

<sup>12</sup> Manon Mollard, "Rooms for Improvement: Anna Puigjaner and Maria Charneco, MAIO, Spain," *The Architectural Review*, March 2018, p. 81.

<sup>13</sup> Korody, "A House Without a Hierarchy," p. 10.

five identical rooms. By adding or omitting modules, each apartment can be expanded or contracted based on the needs of the occupants. This was achieved through a number of rules that they implemented; case in point, after discovering that some door widths limit the number of uses for a room, they chose to use only large-scale doors throughout the building. The adaptability of MAIO's tower is more than an exercise in variability, it accounts for changing social norms, namely the reshaping of the family structure. The nuclear family currently represents less than half of Western society, and MAIO's design accounts for that difference and shift.

Designing for possibilities as opposed to designing for prescribed outcomes and experiences is central to the thinking behind the New York City-based practice Leong Leong, founded by brothers Dominic and Chris Leong. They recently put that thinking into practice as they designed for fluid contemporary social norms with the Anita May Rosenstein Campus for the Los Angeles LGBT Center (2018). Leong Leong was tasked with creating a design responsive to the complicated living situations of both LGBT seniors and young adults as well as the perception of those communities by passersby. Designing for multiplicity and diversity ultimately entails a strong sense of what it means to be human, which is a motif that runs through their work, particularly *A Toolkit for a Newer Age* (2016), a collection of nine 8 x 8-inch objects which they refer to as "primitive technologies." The objects are designed with specific function in mind (one is a mortar and pestle) but the forms are intentionally ambiguous so as to suggest a range of uses beyond the pragmatic. All nine objects were milled from Himalayan salt, a material that Leong Leong continues to experiment with. Leong Leong's

practice is not driven by materiality, but their use of materials is central to their practice. Much of their work incorporates an unexpected, unconventional material, which in itself creates perceptual distortions and unfamiliar experiences. "In general, we're interested in how architecture can subtly shift the experience or perception of the familiar everyday life to open up new ways of living and be more resourceful at the same time. Materiality is one means of creating new aesthetic experiences that take people out of their normal, habitual ways of perceiving or behaving in a space."<sup>14</sup> Ambiguity embedded in Leong Leong's designs allows context and circumstance to determine their meaning.

All five of these architecture practices work in a range of scales and mediums, consistently in dialogue with other disciplines. There is an awareness of history, a technical rigor, and a genuine contextual specificity in the work of Escobedo, Faustino, Leong Leong, MAIO, and MOS, and at the same time there is an embedded ambiguity across their designs. One can't help but begin to draw connections between the aesthetics of these practices and various aspects of contemporary culture. There is almost a fundamental simplicity to a lot of the work: simple geometries, raw materials. Is this a reaction to parametric design and the fetishization of computational technology? Is the tactile nature of the work a refuge from the deluge of digital and superficial experiences? Perhaps, but the fact that these architects are difficult to classify is by design. Their evolving practices need to stay agile so that they can continue to challenge conventions, uncover new territories, and navigate a world that is accelerating at ever-increasing rates. MOS's Sample has described her firm as another form of

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<sup>14</sup> Tiffany Lambert, "Get Ready to Experience Leong Leong's Epic Infinite Sound Bath for Ford," *Sight Unseen*, April 25, 2016, [www.sightunseen.com/2016/04/topo-by-leong-leong-for-ford-at-sight-unseen-offsite](http://www.sightunseen.com/2016/04/topo-by-leong-leong-for-ford-at-sight-unseen-offsite).



education, where they are “interested in how the projects themselves are about learning, playing, experimenting.”<sup>15</sup>

Electing to blur the boundaries of architectural practice is their way of practicing in itself. Choosing to be difficult to define allows these practices to design for a changing field. Designing for a spectrum of outcomes as opposed to specific needs does not have to be a Fun Palace or adventure playground. Leong Leong designed for multiple identities with the Anita May Rosenstein Campus, and MAIO’s 110 Rooms accounts for changing family structures beyond the norm of father, mother, children. The ability to design for a spectrum of identities and broadening social norms necessitates a level of precision and sensitivity that cannot be constrained by architectural trends. Faustino is happy to reject conventional modes of practice: “I think that the architect should engage in exploration in order to generate new negotiation protocols with the centers of power and big capital interests, even if it means taking the risk of no longer being an architect.”<sup>16</sup> The act of visually challenging convention is as much of a design decision as it is a political statement.

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<sup>15</sup> Choi, “Interview with MOS Architects,” pp. 134–46.

<sup>16</sup> Le Gac and Gillier, “The Architecture Project as a Strategy.”