

ARCHITECTURE AS A POLITICAL INSTRUMENT: Andrés Jaque and Enrique Walker in conversation

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The relationship between architecture and politics has been a long-lasting subject that has resurfaced strongly after the 2008 crisis. However, little has been said regarding the actual instruments that architecture has to take part in this discussion. Based on the COSMO project, Andrés Jaque and Enrique Walker analyze the ways in which architecture can be an instrument to impact a political scene as fuzzy as the present one.

ANDRÉS JAQUE: As you know, I've been studying for a while now Rafael Viñoly Architects' design for the 432 Park Avenue building, where Deborah Berke Partners and DBOX have also played an important role (FIG. 1). I am interested in this project because it challenges architectural intelligence in a fundamental question: its political dimension. For many architects, it is an excellent



design that unfortunately serves despicable political purposes – as an instrument and a record of growing social inequality in places like New York. For them, 432 Park Avenue shows that there exists a division between the quality of form, of material configuration and even of performance in architecture, and the ideologies that a project finally serves. In other words, the political participation of buildings is foreign to their design. But for me, that division often does not exist, and this project allows to detect that there are specific ways of doing politics instigated by architecture’s formal, material and performative design. The participation of 432 Park Avenue in the construction of inequality is partly embedded in its design.

An example could be the way the building relates to the New York City sky. Something that begins with the way it is portrayed in the project’s renders. It is a sky of an intense, very transparent blue, which allows for distant views. The building’s developer, Harry Marklow, offers privileged access to this sky as one of the apartments’ major selling arguments.

FIG 1 Rafael Viñoly Architects. 432 Park Avenue, Nueva York, 2017. © Creative Commons

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FIG 2 Rafael Viñoly
Architects. 432 Park
Avenue, Nueva York, 2017.
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Before the building was completed, prospective buyers even had the possibility of seeing the exact views of each apartment, captured by drones from the plot itself. Extraordinarily distant views that Marklow named “helicopter views,” devising a new architectural feature associated with a new type of social structure (FIGS. 2, 3).

This may seem like a commercial argument that does not affect either the project or the building – but it is not. This sky and its architectural mobilization is the result of a set of very precise design decisions. At the scale of the building, the 4×4 square meter windows become fundamental for the design, allowing – from the point of view of a person standing on the upper-floor apartments – to balance the number of built elements perceived with a larger patch of sky. The absence of partitions inside the openings offers views without interference. But above all, the use of a very expensive glass – Lite Glass, manufactured in Austria by Eckelt – has the property of intensifying blue tones (FIG. 4). Considering that in the apartments there are no openable windows, therefore no way to observe the sky without the blueish Lite Glass filter, the effect will be perceived as ‘authentic,’ or rather as unmediated from their inside.

This is just a part of New York’s sky design. Over the last two decades, the city has invested large sums in water purification plants, the eradication of many of its industrial activities or the increase of its green areas. 432 Park Avenue is to be understood as a collaboration with those architectural projects, which seem to mutually follow the mission that Michael Bloomberg clarified in 2013 with these words: “If we could get every billionaire around the world to move here, it would be a godsend (...).” The sky’s pollution has not disappeared; it has simply been relocated to places like Susquehanna Valley in Pennsylvania, where increased toxicity from waste treatment and hydraulic gas extraction has reduced real estate value. The reduced cost of property and the granting of tax exemptions encouraging the settlement of people with limited resources are also part of the regional design from which 432 Park Avenue takes part. The project to increase inequality on the United States East Coast – billionaires on an environmentally purified coast, low-income people in a hinterland that assumes the environmental costs of coastal consumption – is a design project, made possible only through formal, material and performative adjustments operating coordinately at different scales. When looking at each of these design episodes in isolation, it is not easy to see how they participate in these policies. But once understood how they cooperate with each other, it is no longer possible to continue understanding the design decisions that shape them as independent from their political effects.



The COSMO project at MoMA PS1, which we have also called ‘Give me a pipe and I will change the world – or at least some of it,’ is a design answering to those projects that promote inequality (FIGS. 5-7). It was our winning proposal for the 2016 Young Architects Program (YAP) that MoMA convenes annually in New York, and that reaches a great audience through media and social networks. For us, this was the main asset of the competition. As a commission, it does not involve great programmatic requirements, but the real opportunity is that it successfully gathers an audience willing to experience ‘something’ in a critical way. Our idea was to be able to reply to these segregation projects. We were looking for an access point to the process, a context where design could develop political agency. This access point had to necessarily be a difference generated by design. The social and environmental purification of New York City depends to a large extent on the fact that the entire purification process remains hidden and ‘blackboxed’ (incomprehensible to civil society, able to get the results but unable to decrypt them and thus take a position on the intermediate steps and how the processes develop). This blackboxing makes the city’s purification and greening to be experienced by civil society as an indisputable evolution, and not as an intentional design. We set out to design an element that would provide an alternative to this purification, abolishing the illusion that toxicity disappears. That showed the possibility of proposing urban models opposed to the unequal

FIG 3 Rafael Viñoly Architects. 432 Park Avenue, Nueva York, 2017. © DBOX

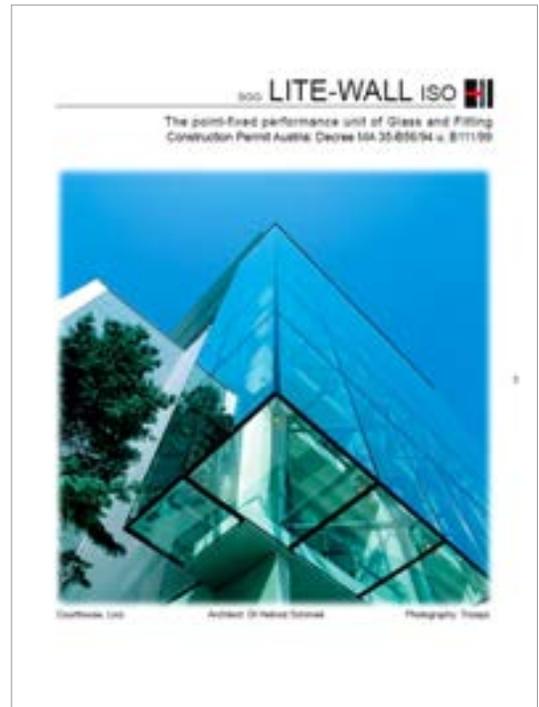


FIG 4 Lite Glass,
ECKELT GLAS, Austria.
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distribution of daily life environmental costs, which fostered a critical reading and understanding of the processes materially regulating our societies. We set out to do so by means of an attractive device that could be joyfully inhabited, and that – by means of the sensorial experience it allowed – gave PS1 visitors and their distant audiences the opportunity to access criticism.

COSMO operated as a vertical garden, a set of ecosystems through which polluted water from the sewage system circulated. After interacting for a couple of weeks with these ecosystems, this water was turned into drinking water. The process began in eight transparent water tanks containing fragments of great biodiversity wetlands, which we grew aided by Brooklyn Botanic Garden experts. In them, water underwent a process of decantation and metabolization, by which a large number of microorganisms decomposed the molecules in suspension. A few days later, two pumps pushed the water into a transparent coil that exposed it to ultraviolet solar rays, eliminating bacteria potentially dangerous to humans. From here, water passed into bags containing different types of algae that, as part of their metabolism, extracted the phosphates and nitrates dissolved in the water. Finally, the water fell into a cascade that increased the levels of diluted oxygen, so that when water returned to the base tanks, the effect of the wetlands biological agents was accelerated.

The purpose of the project was that COSMO made such process comprehensible, while at the same time offering shade and favorable weather conditions which, in a courtyard as arid and as

uncomfortable as that of PS1, could attract people to join a conversation on water, its toxicity and the technologies behind its transformation.

We built it as an assembly of components from agricultural plantations irrigation systems (pivot type), with the idea that it could be dismantled to travel and be reinstalled in other places. But it also traveled through social networks. We developed an app that allowed following the water transformation from mobile phones.

ENRIQUE WALKER: I was very interested in discussing COSMO with you, particularly since your project allowed me to reconsider two opinions. The first has to do with a conversation we have held for a long time on the way in which architecture operates politically (or how the architect operates politically from the profession), and entails both confidence and skepticism: confidence in political projects in and through architecture; skepticism about the building as their instrument. A building, usually expensive and slow in its conception and execution, can hardly articulate an alternative world to the one underlying its commission. This is one of the arguments of the last important debate on architecture and politics at the end of the sixties. But a building can operate critically and raise questions. The way in which it does so has been the central question of our conversation. The second opinion has to do with the competition, and, for the winner, the commission, of the YAP in New York. In a scene where opportunities for emerging architects are quite limited, this commission has become an accelerator, a decisive piece for consolidating a practice, but generally at the expense of the project itself (and, as this is an early project, at the expense of postponing an argument or

FIG 5 Andrés Jaque / Office for Political Innovation. COSMO, Nueva York, 2015. © Miguel de Guzmán





FIG 6 Andrés Jaque /
Office for Political
Innovation. *COSMO*,
Nueva York, 2015.
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position). The conflict between its extensive coverage and its limited architectural potential, partially due to its constraints – a simple program, a site with few qualities, a tight budget – has led many to propose more architecture than what the brief seems to imply: at best a pavilion, at worst, a sort of spatial or building exercise. Before knowing your project, I considered that it was not possible to use such restrictions to your advantage. *COSMO* is an artifact or device that, in addition to strictly adhering to the brief, takes advantage precisely of its visibility as a political tool.

AJ: There was no functional requirement behind MoMA's commission, neither a vision; what did exist was the need for MoMA to attract public attention. What was important to us was what to do with that attention. At one of the meetings, Klaus Biesenbach, PS1 director, told me: "What I want is something that people can post on Instagram." But what was important to me was that this need could be rebuilt by adding other propositions to the commission redefining the PS1's relationship with its audience. *COSMO* can be understood as an object of collective calculation that provides a probation experience.

ew: Indeed, through precise design operations – programmatic, material, aesthetic – the object makes visible and intelligible a process which was

to some extent hidden, and, in making it public, prompts a debate: the political space par excellence.

AJ: Exactly. The question we asked ourselves was what could the entry point of architecture into an issue such as inequality be – a reality that is built through the collaboration of numerous architectures (such as 432 Park Avenue or the territorial segregation of toxicity and low real estate value), but where architectural action does not have enough power to directly reverse these architectures. That is, in our case, it was not in our power – for example – to replace 432 Park Avenue with a building that would empower New York's social diversity.

The opportunity for intervention is not given; it needs to be enabled. It is somehow a way of stating that architectural practices are not always neutral transmitters of the ethical projects previously

FIG 7 Andrés Jaque / Office for Political Innovation. *cosmo*, Nueva York, 2015. © Miguel de Guzmán



defined by their promoters. Design always operates politically by itself. In some cases, aligned with its promoters' ideas, in others, introducing autonomous agendas. I believe that, just as doctors or judges organize themselves as a discipline by claiming their capacity for political mediation, many architectural traditions practice architecture as a project that introduces autonomous political notions.

But these political forms are not those of declaration, of the spoken word or the vote. I believe that in those moments when architecture is seen as a mere transmitter of messages previously elaborated somewhere else, the agency of architectural practices is again denied. Design's agency comes from the use of measurements, of material options, from the way it spatially distributes the agents of those processes in which architecture partakes, the way it filters what is perceptible and what is not; ultimately, of a specific type of politics that only occurs when the architectural devices come into play.

Here, the thing about water is that it is already 'architected.' The experience we have of water is mediated by architecture: by pipes, by the design of bathrooms, by the way water infrastructures are territorially distributed, etc. If architecture had a say in that reality, introducing an architecture that instead of rendering invisible such contribution restored it as something calculable, available for critical reception, this would be a good way of deploying architecture's agency and, by doing so, showing its ability to make a difference in an already existing political conversation.

ew: As I mentioned earlier, in the late sixties many architects became skeptical of the architectural project as a political tool, particularly those most active politically. On the one hand, most manifestos of the first half of the twentieth-century had not materialized, to the point that the manifesto itself fell into disuse later. On the other hand, the critical revision of the legacy of the modern movement ended up discrediting longstanding instruments of the architectural avant-garde, such as programming (the definition of new behaviors and, by extension, new social structures) and signification (the representation of new contents). The project of transforming the world was not questioned, but the instruments through which architecture offered to do so were. Moreover, architecture was considered too dependent on power to subvert it, which led many architects, as concerned with politics as with architecture, to abandon the profession and operate through paper practices (*counterdesign*, for example). Approximately since the Great Recession, the debate on architecture and politics has once again taken center stage. The term politics has been raised in architecture but, curiously enough, little attention has been paid to the instruments through

which architecture operates politically. The return to the debate on architecture and politics has not implied a revision of strategies.

- AJ: I share your view that this is a very important issue. And also that it is necessary to understand how a project like COSMO responds to these two crises that you explain. Instead of conveying meanings, COSMO builds differently the infrastructures in which meaning is produced. That is, it does not introduce a specific opinion on water in New York City, but rather provides the elements for this critical work to expand its audience and for that audience to have more elements for judgment. In doing so, the project does not intervene by modifying or defining behaviors according to previously outlined patterns; rather, it understands that its mission is to contribute to rearticulate social structures, to propose alternative social networks, allowing, for instance, to redistribute the access to knowledge while creating, therefore, an alternative network of those discussing water. For us, it was very important that the debate COSMO promoted was recorded and made transparent by means of the set of technologies that COSMO gathered. On the online spaces that were part of the project, we circulated the conversations and the reactions that the project caused. But for me, it is even more important what happened with the object itself, which was the result of a social assembly – as many of the ecosystems components had been developed by specialized entities such as the Brooklyn Botanic Garden, the digital interfaces development team at NYU or groups of environmental activists. During the dismantling of COSMO, some of the networks of people and institutions that had discussed water through COSMO adopted portions of its gardens. By taking over and installing these fragments in their everyday surroundings, the project itself was expanded and allowed the possibility of keeping the discussion open, becoming a living archive of the cumulus of debates. We could empower a composition [design] policy where design practices play an important role. Assemblage, inter-scalar connections – that is, the way in which, for instance,

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something small is related to something that occurs on a territorial scale – are architectural skills.

- EW: In my opinion, your project draws the attention from the object to the debate that the object itself promotes. In short, it is a device to instigate a conversation.
- AJ: Right. Framing the focus of the project was critical. Also, that it started by assessing what could be expected from its performance. This question is important, as I believe that architecture must always acknowledge that it acts in collaboration with and as a reaction to other entities and projects. The same way that 432 Park Avenue complements its action with that of the centralized treatment plants and the fiscal policies that incentivized low-income people to move to Susquehanna, COSMO must rely on the fact that its action will be limited, but that it will definitely form an association with other forces and with the actions of other entities.
- EW: I would be interested to know to what extent did you consider the history of YAP as an additional component of the brief. You are perhaps the first to use the project's dissemination as a central tool of its argument.
- AJ: Yes. As the YAP PS1 annual competition gets wide media coverage, COSMO would inevitably be part of architects and designers' conversations. Normally, it is a conversation on styles or trends that allows a young architect's studio to gain visibility as the standard-bearer for certain themes and styles. Being a small project, many offices in the past needed to expand the intervention and its ambitions so that it could promote all of their abilities. But for us, the interest was not so much in using this debate as an opportunity to show our office, but rather to take part in a more important discussion affecting our society as a whole. We were not interested, nor would it have been possible, to replace this controversy, as it already exists through a single voice: ours. The project was limited to contribute in reconstructing the terms of the conversation.
- COSMO's form was specially designed to avoid any confusion on its ineffectiveness to solve a water purification problem. It was very clear that the installation was not plugged to any water system. It was a critical object whose aim was nothing more than to propose alternative ways of thinking about toxicity and its territorial distribution. It was not a short cut announcing 'now we can purify the water, and the toxicity problem is over.' COSMO did not solve any problem.
- EW: Its goal is not to solve a problem, or to offer an alternative, but to instigate the conversation that could eventually lead to alternatives.



AJ: Neither the PS1 project nor probably any architectural project could make a problem disappear or give a definitive solution to any of the issues facing our societies. But that does not mean that they cannot establish alliances that end up substantially modifying the way these issues develop on a daily basis, or that they can offer alternative possibilities. I think in the sixties there was a great reliance on absolute ideas and on the omnipotence of the project to promote new realities, without recognizing the social complexity that slows down and problematizes any change process. It was thought that a project could radically change the world by itself. The frustration with the inability of architecture to offer immediacy and totalitarianism is to me a sign of innocence and ignorance; the evidence is that many architects find it difficult to

FIG 8 Andrés Jaque / Office for Political Innovation. cosmo, Nueva York, 2015. © Miguel de Guzmán

give up that illusion of architecture's absolute power. My interest in studying cases like that of 432 Park Avenue comes from the need to understand that any political process is never the outcome of an isolated action, but of the alliance and collaboration between several design actions. This does not mean that each of these actions does not have a political effect, but rather that this effect is not absolute, it is put into play in a negotiation and a collaboration with other entities' political effects. The same happens with the processes of resistance, subversion or opposition: they arise from the collaboration between a number of actions, all of limited scope. COSMO aims to create a space that stimulates a different way of discussing water. Its effectiveness does not come from installing an alternative itself, but from connecting and contributing so as to empower a fabric of alternatives.

EW: If, as Lefebvre suggested, architecture is the projection on space of existing social structures, it can hardly transform them. But it can contribute to their transformation by unveiling possibilities. The Situationist maps are an excellent example. They keep a series of existing fragments to suggest a latent city. As we mentioned, the Great Recession reactivated the debate on architecture and politics – virtually frozen since the end of the sixties – and also architects themselves, who had since passed from wishing to transform the world to accepting that they could only surf the waves (and more recently to thinking they could transform the world by surfing the waves). Your work has played an important role in this recovery. I would like to ask you to speculate on the way in which this disciplinary debate will eventually develop, particularly in the face of current political urgencies, when open societies and their democratic institutions – which, until short before the Brexit referendum and Trump's election, the Anglo-Saxon and European world took for granted – are under enormous pressure. This debate may intensify, or, on the contrary, as political urgency may once again expose architecture's limitations, may be diluted.

AJ: Both issues are related. I believe that the impossibility of architecture's reversibility – its inability to easily change from being a symptom or diagram of such constructions to become an agent of change – forces architecture to understand societies as complex ecosystems, which do not respond to the predictability metaphors of machines and that can only be modified gradually by accumulation of successive trials. Lefebvre's ideas have been key for understanding the relations between power and architecture, but they also tend to present power as a unified force. I believe that in our societies there are multiple overlapping ideological structures. There is no single

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globalization, no single economic power. I believe that architecture has a great capacity to contribute to reinforcing alternative social tissues, redirecting focus, redistributing predominance and making space for the marginal.

Brexit and Trump offer a new relevance for architecture, especially in its ability to bring objectification. It has been important to me to witness that many of Trump's projects have been confronted by architectural arguments. The voice of architectural design has taken news networks to show, for example, that the geography of the border makes building the wall impossible in many points. Or that its effectiveness as a control device would be poorer than that of many technologies already in use. Architecture has provided a space for argumentation and objectification in a discussion set in the post-truth era. I believe that architecture is a tool to collectively manage objectification processes. It is a practice focused on supporting those tissues where evidence is collectively discussed. From this perspective, the work by architects such as Cedric Price or even the project linking the Eameses designs with its films and media installations can be better understood.

Trump's victory is the result of a large cumulus of design operations, many of which have gone unnoticed. I believe that as architects nowadays we must renew our commitment to respond to this engineering of accumulation with a permanent practice of reconstruction, reinvention, and resistance. In both Trump and brexit's case, I believe that this also requires a commitment to the recovery of parts of the past that have been invisibilized: welfare state's capacity to generate inclusion and prosperity in the European post-war period; the social, cultural and economic wealth that migration brought to Europe or the United States tradition of solidarity and its role in the economic recovery after the Great Depression.

I think that architectural practices must now be based on the architect's public commitment. This should also serve to explore new formats for the development of architectural projects. Architectural



FIG 9 Andrés Jaque / Office for Political Innovation. *cosmo*, Nueva York, 2015. © Miguel de Guzmán

practices, as have existed up to now, have depended on getting commissions. This has often encouraged design thinking to end up becoming a business tool calibrated to get commissions (and not abandoning any possibility of getting them). From this point of view, a re-foundation of the architectural practice becomes urgent, one where public commitment becomes the basis for design activities. I also believe that this will empower smaller, fragmented projects, amplified in time and operating by trail-and-error accumulation rather than by its radicalism.

EW: As a cultural practice, architecture has a significant role in open societies precisely in the defense of culture itself, also under pressure, even from within architecture. The depoliticization of the discipline over the past few decades has gone hand in hand with an attack on intellectual practices, and the exaltation of simple solutions to complex problems.

AJ: In a recent conversation on capitalism, someone said, 'There's nothing we can do outside capitalism', and Silvia Federici replied, 'No, that's not true. There are many things that happen outside capitalism. There are people, for example, who organize their daily economy with a certain degree of autonomy from the market dynamics; there are families or groups of coexistence that escape consumerism; there are groups that have created *ad hoc* communities that have been working for decades on the fringes of monetization.' I believe that generating frameworks where things happen in a different way has already a value in itself, a testimony or experience that can serve as reference. Someone may say, 'No, water treatment infrastructures do not necessarily have to be protected and hidden; there are cases where it has been done otherwise.' Architecture has a great capacity to create alternative evidences.

EW: To wrap up, I would like you to expand on the aesthetic dimension of *cosmo*. Your project prompts a conversation through a series of precise design operations. Curiously, the debate on architecture and aesthetics has been postponed even longer than that of architecture and politics.

AJ: For me, aesthetics is not an opportunity for personal expression or the development of a language. It has a specific mission or role: here, a political function. This is also true of projects with other political missions. For example, Viñoly's project also uses aesthetics to pursue political objectives; what happens is that these objectives are opposed to those *cosmo* intended to activate. Precision behind selecting a certain glass is also an aesthetic decision in the search for very concrete political effects: perceiving as natural something that has been constructed. In *cosmo* aesthetics is a tool to make perceptible

aspects of reality that otherwise would go unnoticed. For example, the use of colors allows reading the sequence of ecosystems, since each one of them is framed in a different color; or the transparency of pipes, which does not look for a stylistic effect but responds instead to the need for the evolution of the color of water to be readable (FIGS. 8, 9). Aesthetics is an instrument to give voice to processes that otherwise would not be taken into account. **ARQ**

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