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## Graduate Sessions 9: Keller Easterling

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graduate sessions

KELLER

EASTERLING



Keller Easterling

Graduate Session 09

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Syracuse University

School of Architecture

Graduate Programs

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Keller Easterling is an architect, professor, urbanist, and writer whose books *Enduring Innocence: Global Architecture and Its Political Masquerades* and *Organization Space: Landscapes, Highways and Houses in America* offer original and provocative connotations of spatial theory and contemporary design.

**Graduate Sessions** is a series of seminars and symposia offering Syracuse Architecture graduate students the opportunity to engage leading scholars and practitioners in conversation and debate. The resulting pamphlets offer unique insights into the work of our guests as well as the ongoing concerns of our students and the graduate programs.

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graduate session 09



SL: Where is your work headed now? How has your prior work on the effects of globalization (and the techniques that you've developed to look at those trends) provoked future projects?

KE: It has become clear to me that some of the most radical changes to the globalizing world are not being written in the language of international law or diplomacy but instead in the language of architecture and urbanism. It's being cranked out faster than proper channels can legislate. A book like *Enduring Innocence* was meant to heap our plates with that evidence and to say that form-making, both conventional and that of an expanded repertoire, are wildly active and consequential in the world. Furthering that project, I'm currently working on a book about global infrastructure titled *Extrastatecraft*. The subtitle is global infrastructure change, so the book is about the instrumentality of infrastructure. Studies of infrastructures, networks of spatial products, and management routines again present an enormous amount of evidence to demonstrate how space shapes the way



the world works. But, for me, the contemplation of these matrix-spaces also develops other artistic faculties. It opens a door onto the other half of our form-making capacities with active forms that, far from being at odds with conventional formal skills, are poised to propel (and maybe even *rescue*) them. These spaces also tutor an understanding of political disposition—the programs and temperaments immanent in global organizations. And I'm hoping this contemplation of active forms and disposition will feed an alternative repertoire for activism—one that's less about being righteous and self-congratulatory and more about being sly, entrepreneurial, and effective.

CL: Many of the examples in your book *Enduring Innocence* and the narratives that come out of that book involve historically significant events from the twentieth century—the rise and fall of the Berlin Wall, conflicts within the West Bank, the evolution of Las Vegas—as products of legislated policies that are registered on the built landscape. How does your active knowledge of historical events and the pace at which the world races today affect your approach? Is there a methodology in your work?

**Your talent is not measured by the masterpiece soliloquy or, in our case, the masterpiece building. Your talent is measured in how quick and agile you are.**

KE: Is there a methodology? Well, I have set aside some of the methodologies that accompany the rigors of supposedly rational thinking because rational thinking doesn't explain most of what happens in the world. My approach, to some extent, is informed by the material I am researching. I am often writing footnoted fiction. And since most customary arcs and plot lines of fiction are a bore (because they treat as inadmissible evidence the things that *actually* happen), I am attracted to fresh evidence from the wider world that helps to break up the expectations of familiar stories. I hope that, as a result, these are tales with more material and more opportunity. Every

research question has its own methodology and its own species of document that permits rather than excludes the information it uncovers. Speaking practically, we can all devour not only the local but also the global news every day. If you're researching the way these kinds of spacial products are moving around the world, you can do it much more easily now than you could even a few years ago. It is important to eavesdrop on the web and find rigorous ways of handling that ephemeral information as proper material for scholarship. And for those of us who are studying spatial products, it's really thrilling to watch the way that they work and understand the ways that they expand our artistry. They are not objects, at least not the sort that we consider to be signature works or examples of firmity and delight. You mentioned Vegas buildings—that is useful because we implode and rebuild them with such frequency that they speed up and materialize an animation the rapidly expanding and contracting financial/market envelopes that surround most buildings. We often think of these spatial products as the outcome of logistical or policy decisions over which we hold no sway. They are active forms different from those of the customary pedigree. I want to be able to work with something that's as elastic as they are and comes with time-released powers. The stuff that we used to relegate to a supposedly banal marketplace is part of the pliable material that we, as artists, have in our hands.

NR: On the topic of policies: The notion of *duplicity* runs through many of your writings. I'm interested in how policies influence the way boundaries are changed and interpreted. One example is the different port zones with free trade where people find it easier to do things that are either inhibited or illegal within their own nations. As different corporations, companies, and enterprises now operate on such a global scale, do you think business entities that are no longer limited to geopolitical boundaries are beginning to compete with nation-states?





KE: The title of the new book I mentioned, *Extrastatecraft*, is a portmanteau suggesting *outside of* and *in addition to* statecraft. It does not suggest that non-state actors overwhelm the waning state. Far from it. Non-state forces only serve as new partners and proxies to strengthen and camouflage the state. Rather than declare the death of the state, we identify more mongrel combinants of power than any storied Leviathan for which there is a well-rehearsed political response. States like having a proxy or a shadow double that provides them with a well-lubricated way to do all the sneaky stuff of global commerce, and the doubles like having the protection of the nation state to run to when prudent. It's sort of like the husband who cheats on his wife and goes to church on Sunday with the family. The non-state actor can camouflage themselves under the guise of proper politics while doing what they really want to do. In these turbo-capital partnerships Halliburton can



operate off of tax dollars, move to Dubai to avoid taxation, and then come back and massage legislation. This is a very handy setup for Halliburton. But everyone cheats, so understanding the logic of duplicitous bargain is more useful than straining to reconcile evidence with an impossible dream of forthright behavior.

NR: Do you think "extrastatecraft" is a product of statehood? Or is it that independent entities find a lucrative way to work with or within the state?

KE: We could take the free zone as an example. The free zone is an ancient construct—there have always been pirates and free port operators and Hansa traders and Easterlings (my people were the original free trade crooks). The free zone, like an export processing zone or a special economic zone, is an urban form that usually offers reduced taxation and/or

exemptions from labor or environmental regulations, and it has become a standard tool by which developing countries signal that they are equipped to streamline the activities of a global market players. New forms of the free zone are experiencing a kind of political perfect storm. The World Bank and the IMF as well as Washington-Consensus-style consultancies like McKinsey promote the zone as an instrument for positive free market effects. There are now scores of different kinds of zones. No longer just a warehousing area behind a fence, they often contain a full complement of urban programs as they merge with every format of park, campus, headquarter, offshore financial area, and resort. Many programs enjoy the lubricated transactions and political quarantine of the zone. And then there are petrodollar empires for whom the free port is the most natural environment in the world. They're right in the old pirate belt—the old smuggling belts or the entrepôts of ancient times. The zone has become the new world-city paradigm. Everyone wants a newly minted city-state on the Hong Kong / Singapore / Dubai model. They are the urban shadow or double for the state—the way the state remains intact but still has a proxy to do slightly more slippery maneuvers in the global marketplace. Mumbai has Navi Mumbai. Seoul has New Songdo City. Tripoli has Misurata. We even see the complete conflation of zone and national capital in Astana—Kazakhstan's newly minted capital-*cum*-zone replacement of Almaty.

NR: Do you think that's tied into a shift in what we value? Previously nations would fight over natural resources or land, and now (as you write) information is a commodity. Does that notion begin to dissolve the importance of land itself, especially as we start to commodify these more fluid, abstract things?

KE: Terrestrial territories still have enormous power in contested geopolitical possessions and resource wars. And those terrestrial territories are not necessarily static: They are traversed by oscillating belts of harvestable wind

and photosynthesis and inhabited by mobile populations of cheap labor. However sophisticated the world may be, we don't want to be too quick to disregard the crude politics of turf. The activist group Retort talks about the "old new" and the "new old," a mixing of sophisticated techniques such as spectacle and development with crude political goals. This is the way they described the gunboat diplomacy of the Bush administration.

**The rumor that Obama is Muslim was brilliant precisely because it is easy to disprove. It was therefore repeated twice as often, first to spread the rumor and then refute it.**

NR: Regarding land and redefined relationships between businesses and governments, do you see religion and ethnicity as important on the global scale? In the Middle East, where several factions are in conflict, there's always economic tensions tied in. Do you feel religion, ethnicity, and economics are integrated, or do you feel they're more discrete and separate issues?

KE: This question gives me some pause. Either through cowardice or a sense of urgency about different concerns, I have not directly addressed those issues—ethnicity, religion, etc. In so much of what we do, we are often attempting to relieve an abuse. I suppose my work has encountered issues related to religion and ethnicity in the midst of other political buckshot. I went to a site like El Ejido, for instance, in part because it was charged with religious and ethnic conflict but also because there was an economic lever that was enticing to consider. I may not be temperamentally suited to confronting an abuse with explicit dissent. I tend to want to go around it, distract it, trick it, or divert it. Besides—knowing *what* you oppose is harder than figuring out how to change it. Sometimes one needs to stand up and give it a name, but maybe sometimes it is better to be too smart to



be right or too smart to be righteous. Sometimes you do not square up to every weed in the field but instead change the chemistry of the soil. I have been thinking about the ways in which organizations can possess a quotient of violence that is literally immanent in their organization—a violence that has to do with maintaining intact an isomorphic disposition. And sometimes that coincides with religious and ethnic conflicts, or is inflamed

by them as in the case of El Ejido. Sometimes this violent disposition is the result of the special stupidity of a free market doom loom. Space and urbanism can't stand holding a placard, so in most of the places that I have been looking, I try to look at the ground or the matrix that diffuses or exacerbates that tension. This involves learning to manipulate disposition as a different kind of form-making. I often think about switching Tom Sawyer for David—tricking the seemingly impenetrable, monolithic power that is Goliath into doing the work for you.

CL: Your way of looking at virtue and morality, or at topics such as ethics and religion, always incorporate duplicity. What are some implications of duplicity when applied to truth and morality in architecture? How can architects or users of space vacillate between the physical world and a world

mediated by technology?

KE: That is one thing I'm trying to contribute to my students' work. I worry on your behalf that the architect's training in the making of soulful and sincere moves is not useful enough. Power in the world might be less about sincerity than about the opposite. Compare what we sometimes do with what an entrepreneur does. We try to make something that is a soulful expression of ourselves and is going to last forever. And that's an incredible handicap. The entrepreneur is not thinking about the soulful personal expression but rather about what other people want and how to get them to continually change their minds about what they want. While that might seem trivial or capricious—somehow not grounded in the values of knowledge and culture—I don't see it that way at all. It is exciting to think that, with an entrepreneurial spirit, you might have the ability to make things that can move and travel in the world. This of course has nothing to do with quality or durability but rather how ideas generate spatial consequence. So I know exactly what you mean when you ask that question, but it's been useful to me to turn it on its head. And these opportunities might sometimes have everything to do with designing an active form that mediates between a physical and ephemeral media. For instance, I am working on the design of an app at the moment, and while I am only designing the app directly, I am indirectly shaping the ongoing spatial consequences related to it.

CL: How have perceptions and definitions of activism changed? As our generation has lived through more tame versions of activism, does the utility of activism change? How can we embrace it?

KE: Here is what I might have said in response to your other question: My interest



is in tutoring a facility with active form. I think that we ought to be training you to be reactive to changing circumstances in the world. This inclination may come from my theater training. When you're trained in the theater, you're not trained to do just the masterpiece soliloquy—you're trained to be reactive to someone else. You work on that skill all the time. Someone's always throwing something at you, and you must react to it. Your talent is not measured by the masterpiece soliloquy or, in our case, the masterpiece building. Your talent is measured by how quick and agile you are. That's what I wished we would rehearse with you. I have done studios where a red envelope sporadically appears on your desk dictating a set of circumstances that utterly changes the parameters of your project. Again, a chance to rehearse reactivity and improvisation rather than masterpiece. That is one of the critical skills in an alternative form of activism. In the typical activist script, one declares principles and determines sides. *Whose side are you on?* The sense is that one must lock arms. Speak truth to power. Walk in concert. Be right. Historically it has taken enormous courage to enact those forms of resistance. Activism is typically considered in terms of resistance or charitable volunteerism. There are those for whom activism must only be played with these scripts and within these endgames should be allowed to be right forever. And there is no question that they are right, and they can remain freeze-framed with *Das Kapital* raised over their head. I am only worried that some of our activist endgames constrain the very change we wish to instigate. So I like to consider being an unwelcome accomplice to the activist proper, tip-toeing past them to pursue a dissensus that is more agile, more sneaky, and less self-congratulatory—one that is willing to take on a kind of expanded repertoire beyond the binary fight of right and wrong. It's a much longer discussion, but that expanded repertoire probably includes not only the head-on battle, but gifts, pandas, exaggerated compliance, comedy, misdirection, meaninglessness, and rumor.

CL: Current events are so often portrayed in terms of East vs. West, or North vs. South. How does this affect your work? How do you efficiently stay away from that black and white logic of a binary landscape or geography?

KE: I often like to set aside some of the binaries that we create, so that I can work with the material that they obscure. It is similar to the lateral moves we were talking about when we were discussing techniques for diffusing tense, symmetrical face-offs.

Why would you *not* want to design how the chess piece plays *as well as* the shape of the piece? You are then designing the  $\Delta$ —the active form that travels as detail, as contagion, as program *and* the form that manifests as object.

CL: But it's such a part of the world we live in, that it can be hard to avoid them, right?

KE: Take someone like Samuel Huntington and his "West and the rest" binary. The line he so confidently draws is not really there. The Pentagon and the RAND Corporation will tell us that power in the world is organized in acephalous networks of both good guys and bad guys, or *noopolitical power* (to use Arquilla and Ronfeldt's term). The noopolitical sphere may be populated with terrorists or members of the ballooning numbers of non-state actors like NGOs who work on a variety of issues internationally. Yet even when these institutions like RAND theorize new organizational phenomena, they also often use it to inform to some kind of binary like the Pentagon's new map. It's still *them* and *us*. This crude way of organizing thought is symmetrical in both its territorial and philosophical disposition. We were talking about a disposition immanent in organization. A symmetrical or binary disposition possesses escalating violence just by virtue of the





mimicry and competition that reside in the arrangement. It also seems so much more productive to recognize the ways in which the world *doesn't* organize itself this way. Then you've got a pasture's worth of material for another kind of dissensus, another kind of productivity that's not clinched in a yes/no binary. I like to focus on the exception—what Ranciere would call *inadmissible evidence*—to see how it informs lateral strategies.

AR: You talk about places such as Abu Dhabi and Dubai, and you bring space and dimension into realms that haven't yet been conceived or investigated as a spatial product. What do you think the roles are for an architect when looking at these new spatial resources that are appearing throughout the world in networks of global infrastructures?

KE: When I first started looking at spatial products and infrastructural space I didn't really *know* what I was looking at. I didn't know

how powerful they were. I thought that they were logistical, organizational expressions—which they are—but I didn't realize the degree to which they also are carriers of other kinds of sentiments. Almost by virtue of being logistical, rationalized expressions they are also better carriers of nonsense and excess. Costumes and elaborate fiction. John Meyer, who has studied the phenomenon of global organization, has said *global society is a rationalized world, but not exactly what one could call a rational one.*<sup>+</sup> I realized that the spatial products, as they become more rationalized, become better vehicles for irrational fictions. They demonstrate not the *crisis*, but rather the *instrumentality* of meaninglessness. While we restrict ourselves to the enclosure business, these sorts of spaces offer so much material, with so much spatial consequence. Of course we are making objects that deal with outline, shape, and geometry. But it is exciting to think about the active forms that sometimes work with, sometimes overwhelm, and sometimes rescue the power of these object forms. Why would you restrict yourself to one or the other? Why would you not want both—to design not only the shape of the chess piece but how the chess piece plays. You are then designing the *delta*  $\Delta$ —the active form that travels as detail, contagion, program etc. as well as the form that manifests as object. In theater you would be so bored if all you got to do was the soliloquy. What in architecture is perceived as a split and even the source of petty little wars and form-making camps, is the most natural thing in the world in theater—to consider active and objective form in tandem. The spatial manifest is not made up just of enclosures. It's made of whole clouds and swarms of details and structural pieces—things that don't come as wholly authored buildings but that are spreading around as spatial contagions of one sort or another. Sometimes

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<sup>+</sup> Meyer, Drori and Hwang, *Globalization and Organization: World Society and Organizational Change* (Oxford University Press, 2006), p 269.

they're procedural. Sometimes they're structural. Sometimes they're formal. Sometimes they're material. You get to inflect all of those streams with truly consequential, often ramifying, outcomes.

AR: You critique the idea of architecture being passive and write about the concept of active form. How can aspiring architects be more active and less passive in the world we live in?

KE: *Active* might suggest the opposite of *passive* or might also be suggestive of the kind of activism we have been discussing in this conversation. But I really only use the term to describe a kind of form-making. I am not attempting any number of possible historical associations with mid-twentieth-century notions of flexible, performative spatial scripts. Active form doesn't require dynamism or movement. I am not suggesting that it is a term that can only be used in a specific way or that active form describes a sort of form that is a corrective liberation from some inferior sort of form-making. Still, I need some kind of designation to describe those sorts of forms that are dispositional—that are latent, relational, and unfolding. They have ongoing consequence. They cannot be named, bounded, or fixed in conventional ways. Examples help: We always talk about an expanded field for architecture in very vague and ineffectual terms. And one needs more than one or two anecdotal examples. I always like the example of Savannah, not because I'm interested in what Savannah looks like, but because Oglethorpe was designing the  $\Delta$ . Savannah was designed with dependencies between lots to curb rampant speculation. The lot was not an independent, absolute value but was often abstractly linked to other values and physical spaces in other portions of the plat. Parcels were placed in formations composed of interdependent ratios. A ward was made up of ratios of public and private lots abstractly linked to their central square. The lots and central space were also collectively linked to remote reserves

of land outside of town: you could not declare the outline of the town, but you had explicit geometrical instructions for how the form would *be grown*, about how it would be *apportioned*. It was a very clever, very sly idea that made no overall declaration with a fixed planimetric pattern but yet had very explicit geometric instructions. To make such a thing you would have to be interested in how it would grow but not interested in completely controlling the outcome of its growth pattern, which, in the end, is the least interesting part of the arrangement. Almost all the world is made with these mixtures of geometry and instruction. It's funny. It is terrific to want to design the next Guggenheim—but if you only aspire to that, you simply miss so much. That would be like the incredibly dour and boring actress who says, "no, I will only play Medea." I don't want to say anything, but it is square and conservative. Moreover, you don't get to do much. And the world, filled with relevance for you, goes by untouched.

## An active form may be small, static, or discreet, but it has ramifying spatial consequences, not all of which you control.

NR: Do you think that it would be better if architects, in order to engage in a more shifting and dynamic world, were to scale down their moves, so they could work faster focus on smaller details? A lot of your writing has to do with global issues, but then it finds and describes them at a very finite point in space, where things are actually happening. Do you think architects can work in a focused way like that?

KE: Just to demonstrate that there is no single thing that *is* active form, you could talk about spatial multipliers or contagions that generate a population. I know it's really boring when academics talk about how they teach, but I have taught studios that invert the typical sequence to focus on designing a detail. Rather than working from the largest to the smallest scale, we design

a detail that might have many lives and many different population affects. So you are designing not the singular master plan within which the detail is nested, but rather the detail and its multiple scenarios for propagation. Again, this is a way of rehearsing reactivity rather than masterpiece declaration. Designing a new wrinkle in curtain wall construction is a multiplier. Still, a multiplier need not be a detail as in a construction detail. The elevator is a multiplier, an active form or germ that determines most of the world's urban morphology. It is explicitly designed, but its effects are relational and unfolding. Another example: There are many different kinds of vehicles now that have incredible power to alter what constitutes navigational space in a building. We've recently been fascinated with how skins are changing because we're interested in energies, sun, different kinds of air movement, convection, and so on. The floor might be the next fascination—the floor as a navigational device for hybrids of elevators and cars that move sideways as well as up and down. That's not an Archigram fantasy—that's a very ordinary thing that's happening in Hoboken and Syracuse. Another example: Someone convinced Wal-Mart that their products would sell better in daylight. That would have been a good day's work for an architect as well as a good example of the discrepancy or duplicity that one can instrumentalize with active form. One could forthrightly sell daylighting to Wal-Mart while covertly calculating the surface area of all of the Wal-Mart roofs all over the world and the resultant impact on their energy use. The declared, visible form is the mechanism for daylighting. The active form, the ulterior calculation, travels on the Wal-Mart multiplier fulfilling an undeclared script with a capacity for discrepancy.

**Rational thinking doesn't explain most of what happens in the world.**

CL: Skimming through *The New York Times* this morning, I came across

a review of a book that recounts the slyness and agility evidenced by the British military during World War II when they planted a dead British soldier's body with false information about an invasion from southern Europe. This ingenious level of subterfuge was at such a small scale, yet it provoked a redeployment of German troops. This example isn't architectural, but how could this type of efficiency make its way into an architect's toolbox and into our lived landscapes?

KE: That's a really good example. There's a movie about this: *The Man Who Never Was* with Clifton Webb and Gloria Grahame (it's good!). But, yes, exactly—this is another example of active form. You mentioned concentrated foci earlier. An active form may be something small, static, or



discrete with ramifying spatial consequences, not all of which you control. If you say active form to architects, they start trying to move geometry around in antic patterns and choreographies that represent dynamism with the serial movement or evolution of figures. We confuse *activity* with *kineticism*, which it absolutely is not. When an actor talks about the action they are playing in the scene they are not talking about their blocking or movements on the stage. They are talking about a trajectory of intentions that propels the character they are playing. Active form is something that has some other valence or power or ramifying consequence that travels in space and time even though the prompt might be very still. It's not necessarily moving. It has some other potential—some other propensity, persuasion, or property.

I like to focus on the exceptions—what Ranciere would call *inadmissible evidence*—to see how they inform lateral strategies.

CL: So, at least for the moment, you're operating in between the physical and virtual worlds, or in between the minute and global scales. What is the trick to straddling two scales at once?

KE: One is making objects, the protocols for their propagation and their programmatic valences while also massaging their aesthetic reception. I like your example the dead body—this one body, this one lump that has an enormous effect. That's why one doesn't want to say "oh, the enclosure is a dead form." As we said earlier, one doesn't want to make opposing camps of form-making in architecture that are kept alive only by petty generational conflicts. An enclosure may have its declared as well as its undeclared effects depending on how you condition it and orchestrate its activity or its disposition. In this conversation, I have been using the word 'disposition' without explanation or attribution. 'Disposition' is a word in common parlance, but one person from whom we could learn about disposition is

Gilbert Ryle. He always thought it was so funny the way in which we get confused between *knowing how* and *knowing that*. We're very good at *knowing that*—the correct answer, the thing, the noun—but not so good at *knowing how*, knowing something that cannot be named—a tendency, a propensity, a disposition. Disposition is a potential of the material. It doesn't have to happen. A round ball on a steep incline possesses *disposition* that is reliant on geometry and position. But the ball doesn't have to roll down the hill. It's like that dead man, or soldier, washed ashore. Disposition is potential immanent in such things as organization, relative position, material property, trajectory of propagation or aesthetic reception.

SL: In which ways do you hope that your work would affect future architectural discourse?

KE: As we were saying before, we, as architects, might have more entrepreneurial power. As an adjunct to a seminar on architecture and activism, I decided to do a seminar on architecture and entrepreneurialism. Looking at, for instance, social entrepreneurs in a dusty village somewhere who raise a quarter of a million dollars for an open source software company, one realizes that, even with a running head-start of many advantages, an architectural training creates a practitioner who wouldn't begin to know how to raise even that much capital. We know nothing about money and we don't rehearse a capacity to be entrepreneurial—to be players in the world. Last year I did a show at the Storefront called *Some True Stories* which rehearsed this entrepreneurial faculty by simply spreading rumors that the world had changed according to our designs. We were mixing design, research and fiction to present things that were almost true—little fictions mixed in a context of facts or what Hollywood calls *faction*. We were not saying, *well, in order to act we would have to begin to do something five years from now*. Rumor put us in a position to begin to make it happen. We just



did it. We just start it. The right-wing instructs us about the active form of rumor. For instance, the rumor that Obama is Muslim is brilliant precisely *because* it is wrong and easy to disprove. It was therefore repeated twice as often—first to spread the rumor and then refute it. The hoax that global warming is a hoax is again a brilliant doubling that also harnesses the power of meaninglessness. The projects in *Some True Stories*, many of which addressed global infrastructure, were positioned as examples of the very phenomenon that inspired them—the confidence game of entrepreneurship. Different from the work of some fellow travelers in the world of hoax, we just wanted to design and then congratulate the world on having had the better idea all along. And, if I am telling the truth, a few of those projects are actually happening in the world.



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