

CENTRE STAGE

The American Midwest has been shaking up the world of architecture. These exciting young studios are approaching design with bold ideas and new takes, thinking outside the box for a better future for our built environment – in the US and beyond. Innovation is the name of this architectural game. In our Next Generation series, we explore just how each of these ten practices is pioneering change through a series of profiles

Photography: Hugo Yu

THE CROSS-POLLINATORS ►

Thomas Carruthers & Jennifer Newsom
Dream the Combine, Minneapolis, MN

‘What we make is something that looks beneath the surface level of things,’ says Dream the Combine’s Jennifer Newsom. ‘We are looking for pretty fundamental things,’ adds her husband and studio co-founder, Thomas Carruthers. ‘Who decides what we see? Who gets to feel as though they belong? We have certain ways we are trained to receive information, and there are also social constructs that order our reality. In some ways, our work straddles the built form and social infrastructure.’ Such questions and more lie at the heart of the practice, which was founded in 2013 in Minneapolis and is now based between there and Ithaca, NY, where Newsom and Carruthers have just joined the architecture faculty at Cornell University. The studio is highly

unconventional. While traditional building work is certainly part of what they do (both of them are qualified architects), the majority of their output is more akin to art, taking the form of installations and large-scale structures that touch on a great variety of subjects. Examples include their recent participation in the 2021 Exhibit Columbus, Indiana’s annual architectural festival. Their piece, *Columbus Columbia Colombo Colón*, was a comment on the ubiquity of the name of Christopher Columbus and the narrative around it. ‘The name and its legacy is everywhere, it is impossible not to see it,’ says Carruthers.

Each founder offers a different take as to what their breakthrough project was. For Newsom, it was *Hide & Seek*, created for the 2018 Young Architects Program at MoMA PSi. For Carruthers, it was an earlier work, *Longing*, which was built in 2015. ‘It’s an almost invisible installation, one that we

fundraised for and made ourselves. It was done very fast, in just a three-week window, after two years of ideation. It became a gravitational moment for me,’ he explains.

A collaborative, discursive approach, the frequent use of industrial materials that are hard-wearing, recycled and recyclable (often steel and glass), and a preference for working in the public realm help define their small but impactful practice. Teaching, mentoring (Newsom has taken part in non-profit youth programme Juxtaposition Arts in the past), curating (they are part of a group of curators for the upcoming 2023 Counterpublic Triennial in St Louis, MO) and a lot of open research also help continuously cross-pollinate their work, which is ultimately about people, they say. ‘We are interested in building community across difference,’ says Newsom. ‘Being an architect is a lot about building trust,’ Carruthers concludes. dreamthecombine.com



Next Generation



THE SPATIAL JUSTICE ADVOCATES ◀

Paola Aguirre & Dennis Milam
Borderless Studio, Chicago, IL

Mexican-born architect and urban designer Paola Aguirre set up Borderless in 2016 in Chicago, and was joined by Illinois native Dennis Milam in 2019. Now the pair lead a practice of five, centred on ‘connecting communities to design processes’. Their studio is adept at looking at the intersections between art, architecture, urban design, infrastructure, landscape, planning and civic participatory processes – a skill they put to good use in their varied projects. ‘We try to balance commissioned work and self-initiated projects that enable us to be responsive to the communities that we work with,’ explains Aguirre. ‘We often prioritise collaborating with groups and businesses working with or located in communities of colour.’

Borderless’ body of work is expansive for such a young practice. It spans a women-owned, Black-owned wellness store in Bronzeville, Chicago; a pavilion inspired by weaved canopies and hyperbolic surfaces for the Chicago Architecture Biennial 2021; an installation for Exhibit Columbus 2019; a number of master plans; and a platform bringing visibility to the closure of nearly 50 schools concentrated on Chicago’s West and South Side, flagging up issues of social infrastructure and collaborative agency.

Indeed, the idea of the collective is central to Borderless’ approach: ‘Architecture is missing more approaches that consider collectiveness and generosity as driving values,’ they say. ‘The dominant narrative has been centred on the single creative figure, when we know how collective it is in practice, from ideation to implementation.’ A tireless campaigner for collective power, Aguirre is also co-founder of City Open Workshop (2016) and Design Trust Chicago (2020). The team often works with public agencies and community-based organisations.

The future seems bright for the studio. Aguirre and Milam are in the process of setting up a new office in San Antonio, TX. From there, they hope to engage more with border region communities, and be closer to Aguirre’s hometown of Chihuahua. A public housing redevelopment in the region is also in the pipeline, along with Chicago-based schemes that seek to ‘broaden the possibilities of public art and public space in revitalisation in communities of colour’. borderless-studio.com



THE EQUITY FIGHTER ▲

Katherine Darnstadt
Latent Design, Chicago, IL

‘We’re probably always going to suffer from small-firm syndrome,’ notes Katherine Darnstadt. The founder of Latent Design, a Chicago-based practice focusing on spatial and racial equity, restorative design, and reclaiming access to space for a wide population, is talking about the biggest challenge facing her six-person firm, which she formally started in 2010. ‘But it’s something we’ve learned to embrace – it’s a quality not a deficit.’

Being a small firm has allowed Darnstadt and her team the nimbleness to take on a wide variety of projects and to use planning and financing creatively. For her, architecture and urban planning need to make a profound impact, as seen in work for clients such as the Mayo Clinic, and the Boys and Girls Club, among other projects such as community master plans, affordable housing projects and commercial interiors. For Mayo, she brought a sense of permanence to its home in the small town of Rochester, MN, where there are only 200,000 residents but about three

million medical visitors a year, a tension that allowed for a creative opening up of the downtown area. For her 2018 Boombox project, she turned shipping containers into affordable micro-retail spaces, bringing small businesses into Chicago neighbourhoods that she says are ‘normally locked out of commercial real estate’. She’s now working with one of those businesses, Forty Acres Fresh Market, on a grocery store on Chicago’s West Side. ‘It’s not a food desert,’ Darnstadt says of the area. ‘It’s food apartheid.’

That directness is part of what has made Latent Design a go-to for clients deeply invested in actually changing how a variety of populations experience the built environment. As a certified benefit corporation since 2013, Latent Design is invested in financial and social equity, and in truly wielding all kinds of architectural skills to make measurable differences in its home city and beyond. Its work is ‘based in looking at those kinds of placemaking provocations that reveal a gap, and then turning that into something more permanent,’ she says. ‘Either a policy piece, a piece of architecture or a business model.’ It may be a small firm, but it’s mighty. latentdesign.net



THE CHANGEMAKERS ▲

Ann Lui & Craig Reschke
Future Firm, Chicago, IL

Ann Lui and Craig Reschke head up Future Firm, a boutique architecture practice they set up in 2015 in Chicago. Together with Pei-San Ng, Andrea Hunt and Chloe Munkenbeck, they make up a small studio that punches far above its weight in terms of ambition and influencing power.

So, what exactly is Future Firm's speciality? 'The fastest way to describe us is that we are architects for changemakers. We do not specialise in any specific building type or style, but tend to work well with people who want to make change in their own industries or communities, and see architecture as a means to that end,' says Lui. 'We also like to describe Future Firm as a dialogue between

the two words in our name. "Future" refers to things that are speculative, catalytic, sci-fi-oriented, and "firm" refers to a focus on buildings that do not leak and are delivered on time and on budget. The practice is a balance and tension between the two.'

Thinking about 'unlikely but seductive futures', as well as thinking outside the box, both in terms of styles and architectural atmosphere, and about practical parts of the job – such as the bureaucracy that comes with it – are all key drivers for Lui and Reschke. Their designs for Bronzeville Winery, Eric Williams and Cecilia Cuff's art-, music- and wine-focused restaurant on Chicago's South Side, and Hem House, a single-family home bringing affordable contemporary architecture to a broader market, are good examples of projects that work hard on many levels, bringing

together style, community and culture in a powerful mix that both inspires and enriches the lives of its users.

As one might suspect, picking the right clients is crucial in their groundbreaking endeavours. 'We work best with dreamers, night owls, rebels and rule breakers. People who throw a good party. People who are good at choosing the right song that makes everyone else want to dance. So-called "impossible" buildings or sites,' says Reschke. Meanwhile, extracurricular activities beyond the conventional architectural commission also inform their practice, as both Lui and Reschke are involved in teaching, curatorial projects, research and policy proposals, pro bono and advocacy work, and construction and development. Multitasking and multi-achieving, Future Firm is one to watch. future-firm.org



THE HIP HOP ARCHITECT ▲

Michael Ford
Brandnu Design and Hip Hop
Architecture Camp, Madison, WI

Michael Ford is a busy man. The Detroit-born, Madison-based architect not only heads up the small but dynamic Brandnu Design, focusing on architecture, community engagement, textiles and fashion, he also spearheads the Hip Hop Architecture Camp, 'an international initiative that uses hip hop culture as a catalyst to introduce underrepresented youth to architecture, design and urban planning in a culturally relevant way'. The camp is an initiative of Muundo Inc, a Wisconsin-based non-profit organisation that Ford started in 2016 (the same year Brandnu was founded), and it consists

of a programme that is 100 per cent free for all participants, and which encompasses a paid internship programme that places its top participants in architecture and design firms across the globe.

'My work is defined by my love of Black music. The ingenuity exhibited throughout history by Black musicians is what drives me to rethink approaches to architecture and design,' Ford explains. 'Hip hop offers an unsolicited, unfiltered and raw critique of the places and spaces where the culture was born and where it lives today.' He continues: 'My work extracts the rhythms, patterns, textures and structures that are unique to the elements of hip hop culture and converts them into architectural rhythms, patterns, textures and structures.'

His work, Ford reiterates, is centred on social justice and the built environment:

'Architecture lacks diversity. Less than three per cent of licensed architects in the US are African American. How will architecture look and what impact can we have if we have more practitioners of colour? That's a question I constantly ask myself,' he says.

His voice is powerful and his energy feels tireless, which has also resulted in him being elected president of the Wisconsin chapter of NOMA (National Organization of Minority Architects). Apart from the camp, recent and current work includes plans for the Universal Hip Hop Museum in the Bronx, preparations for a series of textiles and a fashion line titled [W]raps!, and a range of public appearances, including one on Oprah Winfrey's *Super Soul Sunday*. Still, his most significant recent achievement, he confesses, is 'becoming a dad'.
brandnudesign.com; hiphoparchitecture.com



THE COLLABORATION CHAMPIONS ▲
Elyse Agnello & Alex Shelly
 DAAM, Chicago, IL

An acronym for ‘Designers, Architects, Artists and Makers’, DAAM is an energetic young studio with a deeply hands-on culture. ‘The name was a purposefully bold choice,’ explains its Chicago-based founder, Elyse Agnello. ‘It serves to focus attention on our work process and product rather than our authorship, and its playful irreverence reflects our design aspirations.’ Agnello set up DAAM in 2016 and was soon joined by current co-director Alex Shelly. Together they lead a small team of two to six people, pursuing ‘the type of work that valorises neighbourhoods, breathes new life into abandoned structures, inspires a better future, and creates new ways for people to live, learn and be together.’

Seeing themselves as a ‘people-centric’ practice, they place conversation and function at the heart of their design process – form comes after. This is also reflected in their project, client and collaborator choices. ‘We’ve prided ourselves in not having a type when it comes to the projects that we take

on. We’ve sought out and created projects where problems are celebrated, craftsmanship is embraced, and good design is truly valued,’ Agnello says. That said, she does express a soft spot for ‘dynamic gathering spaces’, such as the studio’s LYTE Lounge community centre, and Guild Row, a membership club focused on creativity and civic engagement.

However, their breakthrough project is, without a doubt, Shell House, a small home in the Catskill Mountains. A delicate renovation of a retreat originally designed in 1996 by Seymour Rutkin, its refined approach and minute attention to detail has resulted in many awards and press coverage. More housing work, such as their Starter Home project, a concept they have been incubating for several years, is currently in the works.

‘Globally, we always need more young open-minded practitioners who come from diversified backgrounds that are able to blend their architectural expertise and other life experience,’ says Agnello. ‘Locally, it’s an exciting time to lead a small practice in Chicago. The city has an appreciation for design, and opportunities abound.’
daamprojects.com

THE DISRUPTOR ▶

Germane Barnes
 Studio Barnes, Miami, FL/Chicago, IL

Germane Barnes has wanted to be an architect ever since he was a child, growing up on Chicago’s Far West Side. ‘I had not met an architect or even knew what an architect was, but, from elementary school onward, that is the only career that I ever envisioned for myself,’ he recalls. ‘Perhaps it was visits to my mother’s office in the Sears Tower, or to the park opposite Frank Lloyd Wright’s studio. I don’t know what sparked my interest, but it brings me much joy.’

‘Growing up in Chicago has granted me much privilege in regards to the built environment, which is quite ironic considering the area where I was raised,’ he continues. ‘My family resided in an area we affectionately refer to as K-Town. The housing typology was typical Chicago working class two-flats. Its reputation has always been one that is dangerous and to avoid, but for me it was home.’

Barnes’ experience of the city’s segregation was first-hand – he travelled daily from his neighbourhood, ‘easily identified as a low-income food desert’, to where his elementary and high schools were, in much more affluent areas of the city, observing how the ‘scale, density and racial demographics of the city change’. That insight has conditioned him to address and acknowledge the social and racial demographics of cities. ‘For as long as I can remember, my entire life has been a negotiation of affluence and poverty. These lessons are why I pursue my work.’

Barnes’ disruption of the architectural status quo has won him countless accolades. From his community-driven revival of the Opa-locka suburb in Miami in 2015 to being the youngest practitioner included in MoMA’s inaugural survey of Black architects, on show in spring 2021, as well as winning Harvard’s prestigious Wheelwright Prize 2021, Barnes’ ascent shows no signs of stopping. He rounds off a busy year by unveiling a new collaboration with Lexus for Design Miami, which explores the ethos around the brand’s LF-Z Electrified concept.

‘My approach to design has always been one that is user-centric and focused on narrative. Lexus also utilises a human-centred approach as one of its core principles,’ he says. ‘We’re so excited to show the world the potential that the future holds.’
germanebarnes.com





THE LATERAL THINKER ▲

Ishtiaq Jabir Rafiuddin
Undecorated, Detroit, MI

Ishtiaq Rafiuddin founded his studio in 2017 in New York, before moving to Detroit a year later. Now five-people-strong, the practice is thriving and he has fallen in love with the Midwestern city where he has chosen to concentrate his efforts for now, following four years with REX in New York. 'I am inspired to work in Detroit, a truly American city with incredible history that now requires creative problem-solving to spark investment and inspire communities,' he says.

Conducting thorough research around each of his commissions sits at the core of Rafiuddin's approach, which is 'based on the idea that we do not know what we do not know,' he explains. 'It's a process where we

have to critically analyse the core of the design problem in order to offer a solution. It can be very messy. We have to embrace the process by asking fundamental questions, letting go of preconceived ideas, and look for, as well as accept, the order that emerges from the chaos. At least that's the ambition.' For him, architecture becomes primarily a thinking exercise rather than an aesthetic one. 'A bit like lab work,' he adds.

This attitude can lead to innovative solutions, as displayed in one of his latest works, a Detroit housing project called The Caterpillar in the Core City neighbourhood, which makes the most of the humble Quonset hut, a lightweight, prefabricated, semi-cylindrical, corrugated, galvanised steel structure. Rafiuddin used the prefab elements to produce a single 'hut' containing eight residential and live/work spaces, reimagining

the modest shell into a series of homely yet dramatic interiors with tall arched ceilings and skylights. The result is cost- and time-efficient, yet generous in spatial qualities.

'Architecture had the responsibility of improving the quality of life for everyone, and architects pursued grand visions to prove it. We have lost that spirit over the decades,' Rafiuddin reflects. Which is why he is often inspired by modernist architecture. Yet our era brings its own challenges. 'In general, architecture is not celebrated as widely in the US as it is in Europe,' he says. 'Architects are missing in the middle class, which constitutes most of the built environment and therefore offers the most opportunity. I am continually asking myself why and how we can change this and evolve.' With Rafiuddin's lateral thinking approach, it is all possible. undecorated.us



THE REINVENTORS ▲
Lap Chi Kwong & Alison Von Glinow
Kwong Von Glinow, Chicago, IL

Optimism is a driving force of Chicago practice Kwong Von Glinow. How does that manifest? Often in the reimagining of traditional dwellings to create unique homes for unique residents, as the studio has a particular knack for working with artists, collectors and art institutions.

‘Our work translates forward-looking architectural concepts into playful designs with broad appeal,’ says Alison Von Glinow, who, before co-founding the practice in 2017, worked with globally acclaimed practices including Herzog & de Meuron, Toshiko Mori Architect, SOM and Svendborg Architects. Lap Chi Kwong also worked with Herzog & de Meuron, as well as Amateur

Architecture Studio, on projects including the M+ museum in Hong Kong (W*272), the Vancouver Art Gallery, and the Kramlich Residence in California.

Creating buildings that feel familiar yet are not quite as they seem is their MO. ‘If there is some thread that ties our work together, we sometimes talk about the idea of “some of this, some of that”,’ say the duo, who met at Harvard Graduate School of Design. ‘It sounds ad hoc and arbitrary, but we think it is actually a rather precise way of how we approach design and the result. It’s neither only this and only that or all of this and all of that. We enjoy finding ways to create a balance that can be some of this and some of that.’ This approach extends to their three most recent projects, all historical renovations with additions. One such is Ardmore House, which the co-founders

view as one of their key accomplishments. ‘We designed the home around values rather than criteria,’ explains Kwong. The two-storey, single-family house won the AIA Chicago Small Project Honor Award, AIA Chicago Distinguished Building Citation of Merit, and AIA Illinois Excellence in Interiors Award for projects under 5,000 sq ft.

‘Engaging with different arts and cultural institutions allows us to expand our knowledge and learn more about our city through another perspective,’ they say. Their optimism extends to the future of architecture: ‘We see places like Switzerland, many European countries, and Hong Kong have city-driven initiatives that guide young practices. The more cities acknowledge, build and foster young design professionals, the more young practices will engage in building an even better city.’
kwongvonglinow.com

THE PRACTICAL INNOVATORS ▼

Thom Moran, Ellie Abrons, Adam Fure and Meredith Miller

T+E+A+M, Ann Arbor, MI

The four co-founders behind Ann Arbor-based practice T+E+A+M met as faculty staff over a decade ago at the University of Michigan, where they all have tenure today. The foursome (Ellie Abrons and Adam Fure are a couple, as are Thom Moran and

Meredith Miller) officially founded T+E+A+M in 2015 when they were selected to participate in the 2016 exhibition for the US Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. T+E+A+M has only looked forward since, ramping up client-driven work in recent years. New projects include 4 Over 4, a Detroit-based research initiative around housing, using affordable building techniques and typological variety.

‘In our early work, we frequently explored how digital and physical worlds can coexist.

We see the boundaries between these worlds to be incredibly blurry, and this is a space we play in as designers,’ says Abrons. ‘We also have a commitment to the physical world as found, which often leads to reusing materials, from building components to post-consumer plastics.’ Examples include a proposal for a reassembly plant in Detroit (2016) and full-scale prototypes of sculptural columns made from salvaged construction debris.



This feature was shot on location at The Robey, Chicago. The hotel, launched by Grupo Habita, opened in 2016 in the 12-storey art deco Northwest Tower to a design by Belgian firms Nicolas Schuybroek Architects and Marc Merckx Interiors. For more details, see Wallpaper.com ✱

The co-founders say their focus on adapting used materials is influenced by their geography: 'Detroit, like many post-industrial American cities, has a wealth of wonderful old buildings that have fallen into disrepair. It's common for these buildings to be renovated, but we feel like there are other approaches to consider when working with existing building stock.' This inspired their Building in a Building, made from off-the-shelf modular components inserted into a

neglected brick shell. The space between old and new serves as a community events venue.

'We've been thinking a lot lately about how to combine recent building technologies to build faster and more efficiently,' says Abrons, referring to Northwood ADU, a self-initiated project for an affordable solution to housing shortages in cities using a prefabricated insulated foundation system common in Scandinavia. 'These are not the most glamorous things to consider, but

with building costs as high as they are right now, architects need to be innovating to make building more possible for more people.'

They also believe the industry is in need of a radical rethink to address the wider housing crisis across the US: 'It will require the construction industry and real estate market to be more open to unconventional aesthetics,' they say, paying credit to Detroit's Philip Kafka and France's Lacaton & Vassal. tplusaplusaplus.us

