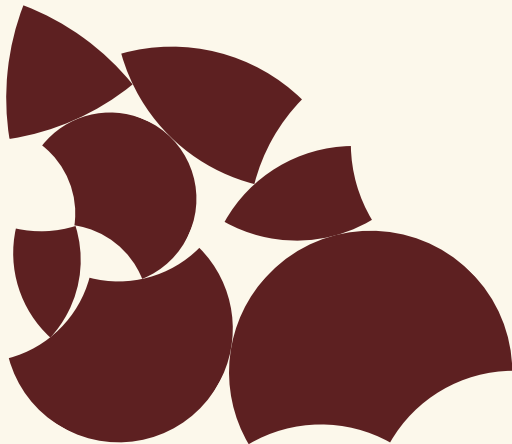


# Searching for Slowness

## A FUTURE-PACED ETHOS



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Massachusetts Institute of Technology  
School of Architecture + Planning  
Fall 2020

Critical Precedents in Practice  
Antonio Furguiele

## - I - PREFACE

Speed is a hallmark trait of the 21<sup>st</sup> century; from fast food to fast fashion, our digital and global moment demands a pace previously unimaginable. But with speed comes compromise at the cost of our environment, health, and culture.

Sustainability and Equity have been identified as two of the most critical issues architecture must address in the coming years – doing so is no longer a moral issue, but an existential one which requires definitive action. Combating this speed-induced abasement, “slow movements” for education,

aging, gardening, gaming, food, fashion, and more have surfaced – but where is the Slow Architecture movement?

Our definition of Slow Architecture is an alternative practice, production, and occupation of architecture, which is attuned to environment and cultural context, with all aspects of the design deeply considered and deliberately working to achieve quality and longevity.

This handbook documents the production of Slow Architecture precedents, while also reviving and critiquing the architectural manifesto. Here, in keeping with the spirit of slow and

collaborative investigation, we are proposing a new, slow manifesto to explore a crucial, slow architecture.

From process to production, *Searching for Slowness* embodies its proposed pace, applying Slow Food’s principles of “Good, Clean, and Fair” to our research and analysis methodology. Rather than making sweeping claims, *Searching for Slowness* values nuance, vulnerability, and process, rejecting the architect-as-genius complex. Through “slow” primary research – one-on-one conversation with employees of firms whose work expresses an ethos of slowness – and analysis – transcription and re-interpretation of conversation content – we have uncovered thematic categories

informing our tenets of Slow Architecture.

During the process of conversing, transcribing, and synthesizing, we tracked an evolution of our understanding of slowness; The tenets transformed as we uncovered personal preconceptions, biases, and subconscious value judgments – allowing us to hold new, and sometimes contradictory, beliefs about Slow Architecture.

The process of unraveling these perceptions and restructuring our understanding of the principles which govern Slow Architecture has been invaluable to cementing our understanding of them.

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We invite you, *the reader*, to join us in this critical and subjective interpretation of the research. Together, we will continue the crucial legwork of collectively defining how a slow ethos will manifest itself into the practice and project of future architecture.

Architects, novice and experienced, have an enormous task set before them – through collective action shaped by an ethos of sustainability and equity we have a chance to slow down our future.

## - II - ACTIVITY

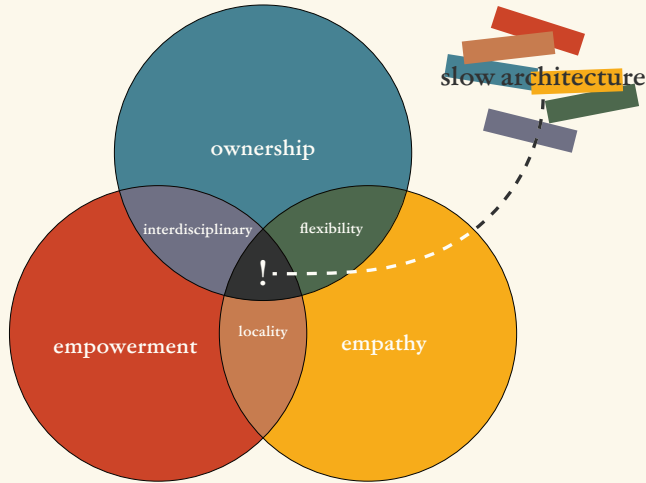
You are about to read a series of conversations with firms whose work embodies various aspects of “Slowness.” As you fold, compile, and sew the booklet, we invite you to analyze the text and respond to the prompts in order to refine and categorize the emergent themes of Slow Architecture.

Using the gnarly sentence on the following page, parse the text for ideas which could fall into these thematic categories – or create your own categories which speak to concepts of slowness that interest you!

Do so in a manner which allows you to understand the theme’s relationship to concepts of slowness, sustainability, and equity.

After completing the first “reading” of *Searching for Slowness*, reassemble the booklet using the instructions provided.

When finished, you will have compiled both a reference guide for your own practice and relationship to architecture, as well as contributed to a common understanding of an ethos of slowness.



# TWBTA

## EVAN RIPLEY

*Slow Architecture is:* an ethos transmitted through **empowered** people who have **ownership** in the projects they work on, who above all build relationships and designs which are rooted in their **locality**, **flexible** enough to accommodate multivalent perspectives and futures, and are inspired by their environmental context, communicating that intent **empathetically** through a haptic medium that is thoughtful, rigorously detailed, and informed by the specialized, yet highly **interdisciplinary** contributors.



Image © Tod Williams Billie Tsien Architects  
 The Barnes Foundation, 2012  
 Philadelphia, PA  
 www.twbta.com

Has the idea of slowness remained consistent through TWBTA's practice?

Slowness at TWBTA has evolved over time – the most visible change in the practice has been the growth in size from its conception to today, and the manifestation of slowness has had to evolve with this change in size from a dozen employees to around forty today.

This scaling up in both size of the firm and size of the projects pursued, however, has been highly intentional and discussed in depth both between Tod and Billie, as well as with the entire staff of the firm.

How has slowness manifested itself and have the methods and processes changed over time at all?

From TWBTA's conception, projects all begin with Tod and Billie and their vision. Whether a large project or

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small project, the structure of the teams and the exact design process shifts to accommodate the project, however the fact that Tod and Billie are involved in a significant capacity in every project slows down the process.

Tod and Billie's involvement in the hiring process allows for a consistency in ethos of the firm – we hire people who demonstrate a shared spirit of slowness, intentionality, and quality.

How does the firm setup -organizationally speaking - support slowness ?

Our goal is to keep team members on projects for the entire duration. While this isn't always possible, we believe that there should be no specialists – there is no differentiation from those who

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design and those who execute. Designers must be involved in construction for design consistently from big picture down to the details worked out in shop drawings.

This desire to keep designers involved through the entire project is our belief in the value of the details – the details on paper and materialized in construction. To not think of construction as part of the design process is a major flaw of the field today.

Could you walk us through the entirety of a projects' design process ?

When schedule is being negotiated between the architect and the owner Tod and Billie rely on their reputation and relationships to carve out as much time as possible in the design phase.

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These relationships are continually developed and bolstered by the work as deadlines arrive.

In the design process, there is a moment when having too much time is a bad thing. Slowness requires not just infinite time, but the right amount of time to push up against. The process of design to execution must be backed by the ethos of slowness and balanced by a sense of appropriateness – there are no hard rules to slowness.

A criticism lobbied about slow architecture is the economic model required to sustain the practice. Can you describe the model ?

Our model is not particularly unique, however we emphasize the relationships formed, and our reputation is generated from these relationships. While this trust

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is memorialized in contracts, the **relationship** ignites our economic success.

By consistently building a **trustworthy relationship**, the **next decision is more readily to go in the favor of the designer and slowness** – all decisions must be made in service of this **relationship** to **build confidence**.

**TWBTA champions slowness as a larger firm – how do you continue to grow and remain slow?**

In short, the hiring process – we hire for ethos. **Most people in the office meet with a potential candidate, and everyone has a voice**, but Tod and Billie make the final call. **As much weight is given to a candidate as a persona and cultural fit as is given to the portfolio, allowing for slowness despite the firm growing.**

**What is the studio's relationship to designing through physically making?**

The studio makes models at **moments to study something difficult to capture in drawing or digitally**, or when requested by a client. However Tod and Billie work heavily through **hand** drawing and sketching.

We never make models for the sake of it, but rather models are made in service of a decision. Slowness doesn't necessitate physical models – **part of effective slowness is understanding the energy being applied to the design process**, and building a model might not be the most effective use of the designer's time.

That said, Tod and Billie **encourage legibility of the gesture of the human hand, believing it adds a great value to the architecture.**



TWBTA's architecture emphasizes a permanence – what is the balance struck between flexibility and permanence?

Flexibility of a space is client and project specific, however the sense of rootedness is an essential quality to TWBTA's architecture and ethos. Rootedness is inherent in the projects, and this cannot always be sacrificed for flexibility, otherwise all projects would be warehouses with adjustable partitions on a grid.

Working on a more permanent time-scale links back to establishing relationships, trust, and confidence in the design team that the decisions of rootedness are appropriate for the space. These relationships serve us once the clients occupy the space should they have requests to change the space or its function.

## RMA Architects PRAYAG BAGDE



Image © Rahul Mehrotra Architects  
Hathigaon Elephant Village, 2018  
Jaipur, Rajasthan, India  
www.rmaarchitects.com

Could you walk us through the entirety of a projects' design process ?

Our design process is branched: there are designers, drafts people, and model makers - each with different rolls in bringing a project to fruition. Each designer has handful of projects at a time, and for each project they are assigned a drafts person, a model-maker, and a principal.

This delegation of specialty allows the designer to be fully embedded in the design process, the drafts person to execute to technical specificity, and the model-maker to bring physical models to high levels of resolution. This delegation frees the designers up to spend more time on the design, while the drafts-people ground the project in reality and the model builders document and create atmosphere.

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The draftspeople are the libraries of the office – they are versed in all things technical, from construction details to local code to file-management in the office.

While the designers are the aesthetic drivers of a project, the draftsman are the production power-houses and make the details work. The drafts people have a massive amount of industry experience, even more than the designers – they are attuned to critical dimensions and constructibility, making the whole operation flow smoothly.

**How does the firm setup -organizationally speaking - support slowness ?**

Each architect is given 4-5 projects to execute at a time, and they are supported by the draftsmen and model-making staff. When deadlines come up, staff from other projects are pulled on board, and the office is often operating at full capacity. With so many projects and once, the financial model of the office is very effective.

At RMA, the firm structure emphasizes responsibility, and this responsibility drives passion and energizes the staff to work hard and thoughtfully on their design.

Most of the architecture staff is young, between 22 and 27, and the young staff are given a lot of responsibility.

**A criticism lobbied about slow architecture is the economic model required to sustain the practice. Can you describe the current model ?**

Environmentally and socially engaged design can be draining, but RMA achieves financial stability by pursuing as many projects as possible at once. The more projects, the more revenue generated, the better the firm can be sustained and further invest in itself. We also have a few projects on retainer – ongoing projects which provide financial stability.

Additionally, working in this delegated structure, everyone in the office is busy at all times: while the designer pushes forward the design, the draftsman can work on another project. The draftsman is always occupied, the designer is occupied, and the office can function at peak efficiency.

What is the studio's relationship with materiality and physical making?

Physical making is a key component of the office's architectural production – Rahul uses the model as a tool to evaluate the design.

During the life of a project, typically three models are made: a concept design model, an intermediate/in progress model, and a final documentation model.

The models are executed by in-house model makers – they are employees with no higher or design education, but greatly contribute to the office.

At RMA, the limits of the hand crafted wooden model are often seen as sensible boundaries to design within – no parametric design is used, no CNCs are used, and most buildings are constructed with 90 degree angles.

As a firm that prides itself on locality in design and material, does the scale of a project effect the studios ability to stay true to its original intentions?

Local materials are considered in every project – especially in arid and hot climates in the country. The architects are in discussion with the local masons, for example, to talk about the type of construction and techniques they are most familiar with and what is most appropriate for the local site. Often during the geological survey, usable stone is discovered in the soil and the design incorporates this as much as possible so that fewer materials are imported and less waste is generated during excavation.

On each project, local contractors are used, and this also helps to ground the project in the local construction techniques.

How does the firm stay connected to their built works after construction? Is there any sort of stewardship?

Clients don't understand architectural drawings, but they do understand architecture when they're in the space, once the floors, walls, and columns are up. This is when flexibility comes into play for us – an excellent structure is critical to good design and future changes to the space. Our design team thinks a great amount about the structure, columns, slabs, and walls. These elements, when planned carefully, can grant flexibility to the client when they are able to experience the architecture for the first time. By thinking about the structure, not just the finishes and details, we save a great deal of time and stress when the client changes their mind or wants to make changes in the future.

## Studio Mumbai

### BIJOY JAIN

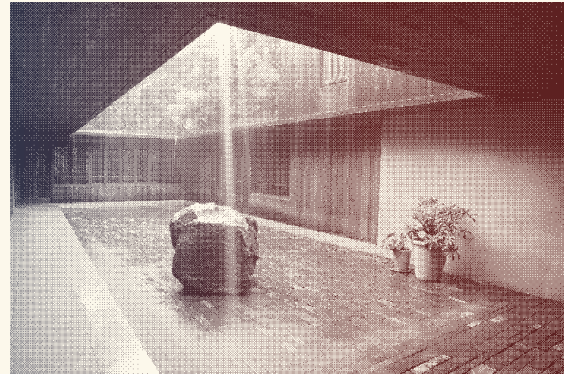


Image © Studio Mumbai  
Copper House II, 2012  
Chond, India  
[www.studiomumbai.com](http://www.studiomumbai.com)

How would you define slowness, and how do you find slowness in your practice of architecture ?

This definition is biased, and it seems that you are leaving something out. My experience of slowness is more general; maybe not even a definition but **an attitude.**

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refer to definitions for our slow architecture definition

Creating good architecture is a bit about being at the right place at the right time – it is an alignment of conditions, and an awareness of this alignment to create a gap in reality and create an opportunity. And in order to have the greatest chance of creating or recognizing this alignment of conditions, you must be involved in all parts of the design that allows for this anticipation.

By anticipating the alignment of conditions, you are literally compressing time – you are

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actually speeding up, not slowing down, time. And anything can be something to anticipate.

Good design is creating a gap in the conditions, creating a tolerance, and operating within that wiggle-room of conditions. By operating in the gap, you never have to close the space between design and built reality – your work is never complete. But design that is not the gap is just an image, a pure aesthetic, and not an architecture. What is at interest in the gap is the pursuit of possibility, not the execution of a project.

Does the scale of a project effect the studios ability to stay true to its original intentions ?

The power of what an architect can do is to make a gesture, to make space. And whether a large or small project, if the gesture and the haptic qualities are expressed, then scale is transcended.

How do you work to “slow down” your practice in its everyday operations? Is this something that is on the forefront of the studios ethos ?

I would not at all call my practice slow – nothing we do is slow, in fact speed is rather irrelevant (its just a rate of change!) What is more important is making gaps to design within any conditions. One thing that we always work towards communicating is tactility; haptic qualities. Tactility must be communicated for a design to come into fruition, but this can't be communicated via drawings.

How do you transfer haptic information ?

Creating haptic designs comes down to practice and media. Haptics can only be transferred via haptic medium, for example models, mock-ups, and photographs of these.

Creating haptic information reduces our operating costs – the cost incurred to go to site, versus the cost to work in studio to capture the ambiance, environment, and haptic qualities of a space, is much higher.

We often show models and model photographs to our contractors, and they immediately understand the design intent in ways that they wouldn't from a drawing set. Our goal is to make the thinnest set of construction

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**documents possible.**

Haptic qualities are not limited to hand-made objects – these can be done in the computer, by hand, or by any other medium, the tool doesn't matter. But when you create something haptic, people will by nature experience it sensorily.

Can you teach this sort of haptic transfer of information? How do you encourage this way of working for your employees?

**Designing haptically is innate in everyone. Rather than reproducing an architectural version of haptic qualities, our design focuses on experiencing the same source of haptic qualities.** This all comes down to design intuition, which we often un-learn in school and our institutions through image and propaganda.

How does locality effect the design, construction and material choices of a project?

**I believe that you have a latent sense of locality. The design is already within you, whether you know it or not, and waiting to discover that design is as important as action.**

The entire premise of the building is secondary, it's the imprint of the building that is essential. **We use whichever materials are appropriate for that locality, while we design using the main materials of water, air, and light.**

How do you slow down your design process? Is it iterative?

Again, your thoughts and design intentions are already formulated, the design is within you from the beginning. I design architecture through **expressing gesture.** There is no prejudice in a gesture, but infinite nuance. For example,



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the gesture of a child holding onto the pinky of their parent holds affection, and we can create architecture just as we can gesture affection. If you design anything that you are personally invested in, then you are sharing this affection.

# Aamodt / Plumb

## METTE AAMODT



Image © Aamodt / Plumb

Smokehouse Warming Hut, 2013  
Winnipeg, Canada  
[www.aamodtplumb.com](http://www.aamodtplumb.com)

**How intentional was the shift from traditional practice to a design-build ?**

We became a design build studio in a rather round-about way. We became interested in quality materials, craftsmanship, and a deep understanding of how things go together – and in a design build, you have complete control over the final product. We are interested in using slow, raw and whole materials – materials that are not composite or industrially produced, but rather materials that come from the earth.

**How does the firm setup -organizationally speaking - support slowness ?**

We are two companies (A/P Architecture, and A/P construction) – this is purely for insurance reasons, however we operate as one company with complete control over the entire architecture and construction process.

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While the design process is similar to most firms, we dip far deeper into construction management. Our associates are project managers and construction managers – they go from the design process to construction documentation, bidding, and procurement. The process is seamless and our staff gain a deep understanding of the entire design-construction process. We learn so much by having control over this process, and we are able to take ownership and accountability for every decision along the way. As our staff gain a better understanding of the construction side of the equation, this feeds back into their design process, and design becomes more streamlined.

As a mid-sized firm, how do you encourage a mindset of slowness among employees ?

We definitely hire for ethos – everyone on the team has to be on board with the core values. We’ve created the S.L.O.W. acronym of our values, which is plastered all throughout the office, in our mission statement, and talked about constantly with staff and clients.

We’ve created an environment that fosters slowness, for example an employee book group and a strict 9-5 time cutoff. We emphasize a work life balance for all of our staff and refuse to let anyone work for even an hour more than we are paying them to. If good, clean, and fair is in our mission statement, this goes beyond just the spaces that we design - it seeps into our culture as an office.

A criticism lobbied about slow architecture is the economic model required to sustain the practice. Can you describe the current model ?

Slowness isn’t literally slower on a timescale – it’s a mindset of thoughtfulness. While we constantly think about our principles, we don’t produce any slower than other firms of our size. Architecture and construction are inherently slow – the higher expenses of “slow” architecture projects typically come from the material costs, not the speed of the design execution.

High quality, fairly produced materials simply cost more, and there is no real way around that.

How can we address this material cost and accessibility issue ?

We are pivoting the firm right now to tackle that. In the past, we have designed VERY expensive single-family homes. And while these are made with the utmost quality, we’re

...

looking for a more impactful and meaningful practice.

Developers build most of the world, and we can't wait for enlightened clients to come along – so we are thinking about expanding our practice to include responsible development. Hopefully as a design-build, we can continue to reduce wasteful redundancies that increase cost and actually save money in these larger scale projects!

How do you convince your clients that this extra price is worth the product or final architectural space?

In the US, buildings are produced with exploited labor. We have no problem shedding light on these issues for clients - we ask: *Do you really want to use a material produced by slave labor? Do you really want to use a material that causes cancer for you, loved ones, and people that produce it?*

...

Specifying clean materials is an ethical issue – creating slow spaces is the largest scale of conscious consumerism, since a home or real estate is the largest purchase most people will make in their entire life! We must remember that architecture is inherently political and always has been.

What is the studio's relationship to materiality and craft?

Craftsmanship has a long tradition in the US, but recently young people have been pushed to receive higher education, to not work with their hands or "get dirty" in any way. There is very little respect for working with your hands, and as a result, good craft is now so expensive. The goal is to build back that base of strong craft in the US, and for us to find a network of reliable Artisans to work with.

How does the firm stay connected to their built works after construction? Is there any sort of stewardship?

If the architect is not intimately involved in the construction, your final product will not only have no principles of slowness, but will also not look anything close to what the architect envisioned.

We are always closely involved in construction – you can't simply hand over the drawings! Creating architecture is probably about 20% design, 80% execution, and you need to be on site, getting dirty, in order to achieve slowness.

Stewardship beyond construction has to do with client relationships – clients call us for anything post-occupancy since we are the experts - this leads to more work for us!

# MASS Design Group

## KELLY DORAN



Image © Iwan Baan, MASS Design Group  
Butaro District Hospital, 2011  
Butaro District, Rwanda  
www.massdesigngroup.org

As a large firm, how do you encourage a mindset of slowness among employees ?

People gravitate toward us because of our ethos – with the type of work that we do and how we position ourselves within the industry, socially justice minded and environmentally engaged people are drawn to the firm and help us uphold our values.

As a non-for-profit, we are positioned uniquely in the architecture industry – not only to attract people with the same values, but also to apply for funding as a non-for-profit. This allows us to do more upfront R+D and engage with communities sooner in the scope of a project.

How and why did the shift to this alternative model of practice happen ?

The practice very much emerged out of a desired or even a need to design differently. We started

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designing abroad in places like Rwanda – and designing there teaches you fundamentals that you cannot learn in institutions. You cannot practice the same way there as you can in North America, and making architecture there sparked MASS' formation.

You work closely with locals - can you discuss the feedback loop between locals and your designers?

There is a synergistic relationship – and so much to learn from these regional differences. When working abroad, you have to smell the ground, figure out who is there and what they're doing – we work to design with the locals, not for the locals.

In Rwanda, the money flows differently than in North America – money flows in smaller circles and shorter radii from the project site –

...

and we use this to benefit the region and our design.

By keeping revenue in the region, this provides local jobs and allows us to learn from local craft and construction practices. Since Rwanda has no deep institutionalized architectural knowledge, it is a vacuum in terms of design and supply chain. This allows us to help shape healthy and sustainable supply chains that are local, not global.

Slowness is largely a cultural attitude, and in places with less of a history of architectural production, there is a hope that we can introduce this slow mindset while honoring the local values and architectural traditions. In Copenhagen, there is a rich culture of

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slowness – in the 7/11 convenience stores in Copenhagen you can walk in and find an organic salad, with its local sourcing noted. I am looking for the architectural equivalent of the 7/11 organic local free-range salad!

**The office has engineers on staff – how does this help you to “slow down” ?**

The engineers on board came out of necessity and emerged organically. After many frustrating experiences with external engineers we slowly added Civil, MEP and Geo-Engineers to the internal team. Having engineers looped into the design team from the beginning allows us to work seamlessly, design with passive systems in mind, and reduce redundancies throughout the process.

How is slowness and local sensitivity encouraged within the structure of the office?

Generally we try to have designers follow through the entire design process and life of the project – some designers are more specialized in the front end, and others the back end – but the goal is for designers to be exposed to the whole process. Its also important to note that in our Rwandan office, there is a 50/50 percent split between Rwandan and expat architects and designers. There is no sense that we are an outside group coming in to teach Rwandans about good design.

How do you convince people that we need to incorporate slow principles into practice?

Its less convincing people, and more institutionalizing these values. This can happen on the academic level – “brainwashing” these concepts

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of good, clean, and fair into students, exposing them to concepts like embodied carbon, passive design, and the value of sustainable specifications. The other way is to ignite change through law, at the local zoning and code level. Since local entities give building permits, bylaws must be written about embodied carbon, specifying materials and systems. You can only improve upon something measured; a baseline for cities must be established, and local zoning laws must demand improvement.

The architects specifications are where as a designer you have the most agency – and this is something entirely overlooked in education and



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even in practice. Specifications determine how labor is organized, how materials are sourced, and how large the embodied carbon of a project is – this is our greatest source of power as an industry.

**Do you slow down the design process through physical making (drawings or models)?**

Since we are an international firm, and always have been, physical making has not been a part of the practice – the digital, sharable model is more important to us.