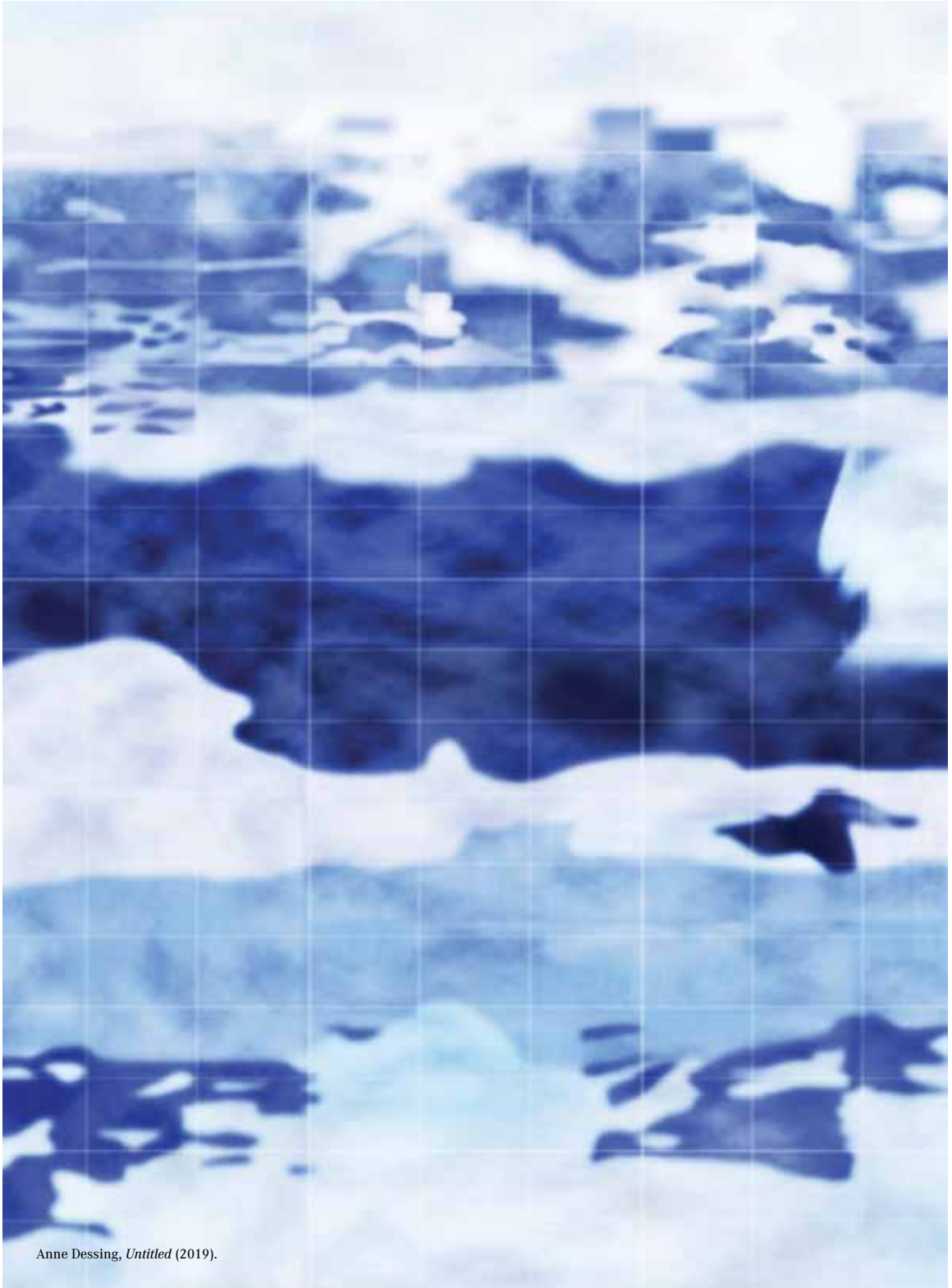


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# DESIGN RENEGADES

*The brilliantly bizarre work of architect Jennifer Bonner, a mountain home with an interior customized for its residents' blue-chip art collection, and MoMA's Paola Antonelli on the XXII Triennale di Milano.*



Anne Dissing, *Untitled* (2019).

COURTESY THE ARTIST



# PROCEED WITHOUT CAUTION

Architect Jennifer Bonner is interested in pushing the boundaries of the traditional architectural canon—even if it means tackling every step of the process herself.

By RACHEL GALLAHER  
Portrait by CHRISTOPHER DIBBLE

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*The Dollhaus*, presented by architect Jennifer Bonner at the 2017 Chicago Architecture Biennial, is a maquette of what would eventually become her fully realized Haus Gables project.



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sk most architects about the inspiration behind a project and they're likely to cite nature, an industry titan, or the constraints of the building site. But ask Jennifer Bonner—founder of the creative practice MALL and a recipient of this year's prestigious Architectural League Prize for Young Architects and Designers—about the house she designed for her family in Atlanta, and she'll start talking about sandwiches and hats. Thirty-nine years old, with an asymmetrical platinum bob and chartreuse-framed glasses, Bonner looks every inch the cool creative, but throw in her soft southern lilt, obsession with pop culture, and degree from Harvard, where she was recently promoted to associate professor of architecture in the Graduate School of Design, and it's clear this woman is not your average design practitioner.

"I have one foot in academia and one foot in practice, so I'm always exhibiting or writing or conceptualizing [my] work first," she tells me one cloudy early-summer afternoon. "I start with a set of questions about architecture, then I do research and try to flip it into real projects." We're sitting in the rooftop community room at the modern Portland apartment building where she, her husband, and her daughter live, and as GRAY's photographer clicks off shots, Bonner keeps apologizing for the décor, laughing and offering to help rearrange things. They haven't been here long: the trio was based in Cambridge, Massachusetts (with plans to move to Atlanta), until this past summer, when Bonner's husband accepted a job at Nike and they headed west.

Highly conceptual and brilliantly bizarre, her work aims to disrupt the American architecture scene via projects that are at once irreverent and smart. *Best Sandwiches* is one such example: it's Bonner's 2016 design and research project that explores spatial stacking using the simple idea of a sandwich, in which each filling represents a separate floor. Bonner and her team created nine colorful model building "sandwiches" based on various lunchtime classics, including the grilled cheese, the BLT, and the hamburger. The works were displayed at Boston's Pinkcomma Gallery in a visual feast that prompted viewers to rethink traditional approaches to design.

*Best Sandwiches* is also a testament to the idea that design doesn't have to be a cut-and-dry process. Bonner is a serious academic, but she often filters conceptual questions about architecture through a lighthearted, pop culture-tinged lens to demonstrate that good design can also be fun design.

She chose the sandwich metaphor because, as she explains, "everyone is familiar with the cultural phenomenon of the fight for the 'best' sandwich," or ice cream or restaurant, that's constantly being waged in glossy city magazines. "Whether it's two cities each trying to say they have the best pastrami, or multiple restaurants in the same city, I wanted to see what would happen if we dragged that 'best' scenario into architecture. Could it provide something new visually? It was [about] starting not with the architectural canon but with the everyday."

While Bonner's approach isn't new, it is singular in the fact that she serves as both designer and developer on most of her projects. Many academics delve into conceptual questions or undertake case studies, but often their work finds its end in physical or digital models. Bonner is taking her theories into the built environment: at the end of last year, she turned one of her years-long research projects into a home for herself and her family. Called Haus Gables and located in Atlanta's Old Fourth Ward neighborhood, it is a proof-of-concept project based on Bonner's study of southern roof typologies, particularly the dominant gable and hip styles. Rather than planning the home from the ground up, Bonner flipped the usual process on its head, designing the roof first and then formulating everything else, both interior and exterior, from the roofline to the ground.

"Jennifer has an unflagging enthusiasm and willingness to take risks," says architect Christian Stayner of Los Angeles-based Stayner Architects. He and Bonner overlapped by a semester in graduate school at Harvard but didn't know each other until they were both teaching at Woodbury University in LA. "I know she's gotten pushback from her colleagues because her project in Atlanta doesn't have a 'client,' so it's [seen as] somehow lesser in value. I think she has great potential in her quest to 'design' the client rather than be a sort of mercenary architect. That's really exciting and will have a lasting impact."

Bonner cites the late John C. Portman Jr., another southern architect known for taking unconventional design risks, as her hero. With a career spanning more than five decades, Portman was an early and successful pioneer of the designer-developer model—his work popularized multistory atria in hotels and office buildings, and he revitalized Atlanta's urban core in the '70s and '80s. It's one thing to present a new architectural style; what made Portman so remarkable is that he made it extremely profitable. Following in his footsteps, Bonner is interested in exploring fresh ways to divide and use space. »

**FROM FRONT:** Bonner in Portland, Oregon.  
Detail of an exterior building material Bonner  
customized for her 2017 installation *Another  
Axon* at the Design Biennial Boston.



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—JENNIFER BONNER



*Best Sandwiches*, Bonner's 2016 design and research project that explores spatial stacking.



Given her strong academic credentials (Bonner attended Auburn University as well as Harvard) and design curiosity, it's surprising that she wasn't interested in buildings—"I spent a lot of time at the mall when I was a teenager," she admits—until college. "Growing up in suburban Alabama, I was very creative and into art, but I had never heard the word *architecture* until my dad suggested it as an area of study," she says. "I was like, 'Architecture? What is that?'" But in her senior year at Auburn, she was accepted into the Rural Studio, an off-campus design-build program that is part of the School of Architecture's Planning and Landscape Architecture division. Established by architects D. K. Ruth and Samuel Mockbee in 1993, Rural Studio was radical for its time because its students took part in real-world projects. "Students were graduating with actual built work in their portfolios," Bonner says. "In my early 20s, I came out of the program and was able to say that I had building experience and show it to firms. It wasn't just drawings."

Mockbee, who grew up in Meridian, Mississippi, during the Civil Rights movement, provided his students with hands-on work experience while assisting the underserved population in west Alabama's Black Belt region. The budding architects were encouraged to think outside the box when it came to materials (many of the studio's structures utilized donated or recycled elements otherwise destined for the landfill, such as old car tires, windshields, discarded license plates, and hay bales) and to take into account the social responsibilities of architectural practice. Mockbee, who died of leukemia in 2001, famously said, "As an artist or an architect, I have the opportunity to address wrongs and try to correct them." It was an ethos he instilled in his students as well.

"It was truly life-changing," Bonner says of her time at Rural Studio. "Mockbee had us leave campus, drive two and a half hours away, and live in a poor rural area so we would have zero distractions and develop a connection to the place we were building for. We were encouraged to experiment with our designs, not create standard housing for a poverty-stricken community." Poor communities as well as wealthy ones, she learned, deserve high-level design. Bonner's undergraduate thesis project, designed and built with three other students, was part of a larger effort to revitalize an abandoned 1930s-era park in Marion, Alabama, that had been closed and left untouched since 1970. The quartet built a cedar-and-aluminum pavilion that not only received a 2005 Architectural Review Award for Emerging Architecture, but also became a popular gathering place for area residents. From hosting fish fries and family reunions to accommodating the local elementary school's field trips, the simple modern structure

is a testament to the power of architecture and its ability to bring people together.

After graduating in 2002, Bonner felt that she should broaden her learning by experiencing the "complete opposite" of rural Alabama. She went to London, where she worked for architect Norman Foster's firm. "The population of the Alabama town where I had been living was 200," she says. "Foster + Partners had around 600 people in their office. The first project I worked on was a 65-meter pyramid in the backyard of the president of Kazakhstan's palace. It was a different world." Bonner also spent a year and a half at London's David Chipperfield Architects before returning stateside to attend Harvard. "During my last semester, the [2008 financial] crash happened, and there were no jobs available," she says. "That's how I ended up starting my own firm."

MALL, which stands for Mass Architectural Loopty Loops, is an irreverent throwback to Bonner's high school days spent roaming the mall, but the name also pokes fun at traditional firm monikers that make acronyms out of the partners' initials (SOM, BIG, ZGF, etc.). She notes that it could also stand for Miniature Angles and Little Lines or any other number of descriptors, a built-in, quirky flexibility reflective of the firm itself.

The practice, built on projects that evolve iteratively from a set of questions or observations, demands that kind of versatility. "I started out with no clients, so I had to self-invent work to get things going and actually make money," she says with a laugh. In 2011, while Bonner and Stayner were teaching at Woodbury, they teamed up to apply to open calls for public art projects around the country. "We were both trying figure out how to establish a practice in Los Angeles during the most dismal climate in architecture ever," Stayner recalls in an email. "We found commonality in that we were both dedicated to forming an aesthetic while also [being] concerned with larger societal issues. At the time, most of our peers were abandoning the profession like it was a sinking ship, so we were trying to figure out how to stay afloat and decided to team up in our efforts to bail out water early in our careers."

Because architectural commissions were down across the country, they looked to public art, a rare area where checks were still being written. "Money for those projects was protected by public buildings and institutions," Bonner explains, "so we applied to 100 open calls in two years. We were shortlisted for eight or nine, and we won one." The winner, called Made in Opa-Locka, was meant to revitalize the deteriorating Triangle neighborhood in Florida's Opa-Locka by launching small businesses centered around arts, tech, and community services. Rather than erecting new buildings, Bonner and Stayner »

proposed modifying existing single-family houses and several civic buildings to give residents room to start their own ventures: a bicycle-repair shop, a laundromat, a hair salon. Ultimately, their plans were never fully realized, but Bonner and Stayner were successful in helping the client (Willie Logan, CEO of the Opa-Locka Community Development Corporation) develop a community-wide brand identity, “Made in Opa-Locka,” which is still used today.

Aside from social justice issues, Bonner is fascinated by materiality: her two-year-long *Faux-Brick* research project (2017–19) examined the use of exterior faux finishes in Mies van der Rohe’s villas, Haus Esters and Haus Lange, and their implications for contemporary architecture. Another project, undertaken while she taught at Atlanta’s Georgia Tech, was a book called *A Guide to the Dirty South—Atlanta* (2018), penned by Bonner and her students. Taking cues from the epic East Coast–West Coast rap battles of the ’90s, they looked at the unusual architecture and urban planning of Atlanta, uncovering a third prominent design nomenclature beyond coastal academic hubs. She’s also deeply interested in architectural typologies: her research project *Domestic Hats* (2014), which investigated roof styles and was named for the “hat” that every house wears, was an exhibition of waist-high massing models (3D architectural models that minimize detail and are often made out of a single material, much like small-scale rough drafts). *Domestic Hats* depicted complicated mashups of various roof styles, from dormer to shed to gable, and Bonner used it as the launch pad for Haus Gables. It also demonstrated the potential of her academic approach—and Bonner’s resolve to bring her ideas to life, even if that means doing it alone.

*Domestic Hats*, in its reimagining of a standardized housing element, inspired Bonner to ask questions: What would happen if you designed a roof before the rest of a house? What would that approach do to the interior spaces? After exhibiting a maquette called *The Dollhaus* at the 2017 Chicago Architecture Biennial, Bonner went on to build the real thing. Collaborating with a high-caliber team, including structural engineer Hanif Kara (who’s worked with Norman Foster, David Chipperfield, Foreign Office Architects, and Zaha Hadid) and CLT installation expert Terry Ducatt, Bonner created a structure completely outside the traditional architectural canon—one intended not merely to house her family, but also, as she pointed out several times during our interview, to demonstrate the importance of creating work outside the paradigm as a way to evolve the field.

Completed in December 2018, Haus Gables draws from southern design typologies and retains the crashing-together gables of the *Domestic Hats* models, and it is also one of only a handful of single-family residential projects in the US built with cross-laminated timber panels. Haus Gables’ roof organizes the rooms, catwalks, and double-height spaces of its interior, and Bonner used faux

finishes—Italian tile, some of it only  $\frac{1}{4}$  of an inch thick, takes the place of terrazzo in the open kitchen—and Instagrammable blocks of teal, millennial pink, and sunshine yellow throughout. “There was a time when people in Atlanta were building really elaborate houses modeled after ones in Europe, but they didn’t have the resources [to find the same] materials being used overseas,” Bonner says. “They often brought in other, cheaper materials for the same effect. Fake it until you make it—there’s a tradition in that.”

Before leaving Atlanta, she was in talks with several emerging architects about creating a micro-neighborhood of Haus Gables-style homes in Atlanta. Since our interview, the project has developed into a solo MALL venture: a neighborhood with 10 single-family houses (designed by Bonner and constructed out of CLT panels) on a small urban parcel near the BeltLine, a former railway corridor that runs around the core of the city. The project will act as an important barometer for Bonner’s aesthetic: will the proof-of-concept house that she designed, and which served her own family well, be bought by other people?

In coming months, Bonner will begin researching the traditions and regional typologies of the Pacific Northwest—and she has plans in the works for Haus Gables 2.0 in Portland. Although she’s still in the looking-for-property phase, Bonner plans to use the same typologies she deployed in Atlanta (with different roof combinations), but this time the exterior, stark white in the original, will be black. In addition to keeping up with her peripatetic teaching schedule, Bonner is also ready to start a new body of work that delves into the study of exterior materials and their representation in architectural renderings. “I’ve been rendering materials in strange ways in order to ‘invent’ new ones,” she notes. Findings from her research will be presented at Kent State University in November in a show titled *Haus Scallop*, *Haus Sawtooth*.

In the classroom, Bonner, who spends half of her time on the East Coast as she continues to teach at Harvard, is starting to feel a generational shift between herself and her students. “I’m identifying less with them,” she says with a laugh. “I can’t understand what they like and why they like it! But people work very differently than they did 50 years ago, and things like social media and technology allow you to invent whatever mode of practice you want.” She could just as easily be talking about herself, as she fearlessly questions the way things are done in a long-established field. Perhaps her mixture of the playful (hats, sandwiches, dollhouses) and architectural pedagogy catches you off-guard, but it’s meant to make you rethink ingrained approaches to everything from the way a building should look to how to solve design problems. “It’s an exciting time” in the field, Bonner says. “For a while now, there’s been no way forward; everyone has been doing the same thing. Modernism ran on for so many decades, but now we’re in the middle of this free-for-all. I can’t wait to see what happens next.” ✨



Inside Haus Gables in Atlanta. Bonner designed the single-family house, one of the few in the United States to be constructed with CLT panels, starting with the roof. The result is a unique interior layout informed by a set of gables that “crash” into each other.

