

“conversation”

IMAGE: JONX PILLEMER

Aravena | Meindertsma Hustwit | Nussbaum

Conversation between architect **ALEJANDRO ARAVENA**, filmmaker **GARY HUSTWIT**, designer **CHRISTIEN MEINDERTSMA** and journalist **BRUCE NUSSBAUM**, moderated by **JUSTIN MCGUIRK**, during Design Indaba, Cape Town, 26 February 2010
Photography by **JONX PILLEMER**

DISCUSSED

- the problem with being Martha Stewart
- how does a designer become massive?
- dropping the H-bomb in meetings
- “design thinking” vs the liberal arts
- politicians and their egos
- engineers took over the world
- the “so what?” question

JUSTIN MCGUIRK When we held our Design Indaba conversation last year (icon 071) the theme was obvious: change. Obama had just been inaugurated and the full scale of the recession had become apparent. This year, I thought we could talk about new economic models of design. The question is what model should a young designer who’s just starting out follow? Alejandro’s social housing, which involves only building half of a house, is a new economic model. But we all saw Martha Stewart present her bizarre corporate sales pitch at the conference today. And that’s another design model. Perhaps we can start by discussing her.

BRUCE NUSSBAUM I’ll defend her if you like.

GARY HUSTWIT Are you kidding?

BN No! This is how I defend her performance today. South Africa in particular, but lots of places all around the world, want to take their traditions and their crafts and transform them into economic growth, and that is in my opinion a wonderful idea. Martha nakedly shows you how to do that in a cold and businesslike way. And you could argue that the culture that she peddles is shallow and not sophisticated. I would argue that in fact it is a very real culture for a substantial number of Americans, who love her stuff. They love the kitschy-ness of it. She said that handicrafts are a \$30 billion business in the

US, which is huge. Her presentation today, while on one level completely cold and banal, was on another level completely transparent about the idea of using design to generate economic growth. I rest my case.

GH But you can be transparent about your motive to make money from design, or from housewares, but that presentation wasn’t about how to commodify your design. It was just a list of everything that was in her empire and how popular it is. If she’s going to come to a conference with all these amazing speakers and a crowd that’s hungry for inspiration and knowledge, and do that corporate sales pitch ... that makes me angrier than anything that she does ... I asked her what her speech was going to be about and she said “Martha Stewart inspirations” – she used the third person.

CHRISTIEN MEINDERTSMA I think it’s quite strange that the basis is homemade, which implies that you would make something yourself. You don’t have to buy from Martha Stewart in order to make for yourself. There’s a big gap between homemade things, which would probably be sustainable, and her things. It’s in fact a really big industry.

GH But that’s smart because she’s playing both sides – she’s saying well here’s the dream of you in your house, expressing your creativity, but if

you can’t do that, I’ve got the paints and all these things. All the other stuff carries the veneer of her home-world, with the chickens, the farm house, the French bulldogs and the flower gardens. She’s selling the dream! All that stuff is to establish the dream and then sell the billion-dollar paint line and linens and other byproducts.

ALEJANDRO ARAVENA There are many interesting things to think about, but for me there is one big, big issue, which is how are you able to become massive? Not just an interesting exception but the mainstream. If you are doing things that you really believe are good, I think it’s a kind of responsibility to make it become the mainstream. Take social housing, in my case. I would really like it to be millions of units and not just an interesting exception. And Martha Stewart has found a way to be mainstream. The dilemma – the price she’s paid – is that she’s reduced the complexity. The question is how to be massive without simplifying.

BN Why do you say she’s simplified? I would argue that in the parts of America where her stuff is sold, and a lot of it is sold cheaply at mass-market places, she has raised the quality of design for everyday things on a massive scale.

AA I think you just mentioned the key word: “everyday”. She used that word I don’t know how many times. The reason she is so bland and



Clockwise from below **Gary Hustwit**; **Bruce Nussbaum**; **Justin McGuirk** and **Christien Meindertsma**; **Alejandro Aravena**

inoffensive is because all her things have a deadline of the end of the day: dinner, organising the closet, taking care of the flowers. But what if you were dealing with the making of the city? You’d have to design forever – a highway, housing, public space. The timeline requires a different level of complexity. So she raises a very interesting question for me because I would like to – if I believe in what I’m doing – become as massive as she is, but I can’t pay the price of simplifying or reducing my timeline to the end of the day. I think it’s entirely connected to your question of new models of design.

BN You should also know that she was planning to launch Martha Stewart prefab housing. And unfortunately – or fortunately, whatever – she went to jail before it happened.

GH It wouldn’t have been Martha Stewart social prefab housing though, it would have been \$300,000 prefab houses...

BN She was contracting with several prefab housing groups to manufacture relatively inexpensive housing – middle-class housing – within three styles of Martha Stewart, and she would sort of fill them up or what have you.

JM Is there anything wrong with it? People have to create their homes according to their means and tastes.

AA I wrote two words during her presentation: “romantic” and “dreaming”. In both words you are trying to get away from tough reality. Again, things that are inoffensive and bland. You don’t want to go into tough issues. Even with your home you try to escape to a happier time. I’m OK with people wanting to do that but the thing is I’m not going to do that.

CM A lot of the women who love this romantic style would probably also love my knitted rugs. They’re also romantic and lovely, but my problem with her empire would be that it’s not romantic. Big industry just isn’t romantic. And I find it really interesting that she has so much power, almost political power, but because of what she makes. I find this a complicated question for design – it’s like when Ronan Bouroullec said there are millions of his Algues [plastic screen units] and he’s at the other end from Martha Stewart but still producing so many things. How should we think about this ... it’s not romantic!

JM Yeah, he even called it “pollution”. But this question of being massive, and the responsibility to be massive, is interesting because obviously no designers are massive compared to Martha Stewart. She’s a mediator who presents other people’s ideas to the masses. And that becomes a cult of the personality, which is an easier business model than being a good designer.

GH It’s pure capitalism. It’s making things cheaply and then selling a lot of them. And that whole thing about getting massive – it’s still about money. If I gave you a billion dollars, Alejandro, how many housing units could you build? If you had billions you wouldn’t be having this conversation, you’d be around the world building tens of thousands of units.

AA So maybe you combine the two things – trying not to be inoffensive and simultaneously massive. She might be massive, but still [drawing a pyramid] she’s aiming at somewhere in the middle of the social pyramid. The real massive is at the bottom of the pyramid [with the poor]. We’re not even scratching this part of the pyramid. It requires you not to be simplistic. You can’t be inoffensive when you’re dealing with housing. You get people shouting at you in meetings. If you don’t do what you said you were going to do, you get people who come to your office and chain themselves to the door. The problem is that this is not sexy, so try to frame it in a sexy way – this is a professional challenge and it will need brilliant minds. Charity and good will are not enough. I mean, this is running 100m in less than 10 seconds.

BN It’s a very interesting argument to me because what I took away from your speech, Alejandro, was something different. It wasn’t scale, it was the fact that what you’re offering



Above Alejandro Aravena
Right Monterrey Housing,
Mexico, by Elemental,
Aravena's practice, 2009



is less of a completed house structure and more of a platform that you co-create with people. You allow them to do all this stuff for themselves – it's organic, they can use that space to rent out, to put a little store there. It's hugely flexible, so in some ways what you're creating is a little bit like what Steve Jobs created with the iPhone: it's a great platform that allows other people to actually create whatever they want. To me that's why it's so appealing and has such power – it's like a set of tools that you're giving them which is called housing but allows them to build a life.

AA Yeah, it's an open system – I don't control the end, I just give some rules, but since the rules are simple you can go massive without a bad conscience. Because our design is finished by someone else in an uncertain way, it won't harm diversity. That's why I'm claiming for massiveness because if we think our solution is better than the concrete boxes the government supplies, there's a responsibility for that to be the normality and not just an interesting thing to discuss in a symposium.

CM In a way, what you do is the opposite of what Martha Stewart does. You make the necessary things and what people really need they add – she makes things that nobody needs.

JM Can anyone think of an example in design of that kind of penetration, of something that is

aimed at a huge number of people rather than the tiny minority?

BN The things that are the most disruptive are the ones that are in fact platforms as opposed to complete solutions. Especially with the younger generation – people want to be able to take something and build on to it. So we always get back to the iPhone, but any open-source product: Wikipedia, or ZipCar, where you're sharing instead of owning. That's the most powerful stuff.

AA But that encounters another dilemma that is very human too, even in politics: that is, you don't want to go down in history as the guy not giving the solutions but half of the solutions. There's a temptation to say "I was the one who gave the solution", because if I give just half, it means I'm not as powerful as I want to appear, and to a politician that is unacceptable. I mean, smart solutions tend not to be compatible with what is politically correct in the sense of showing power. It's so human I guess that the basic feeling is shame or not being able to show off.

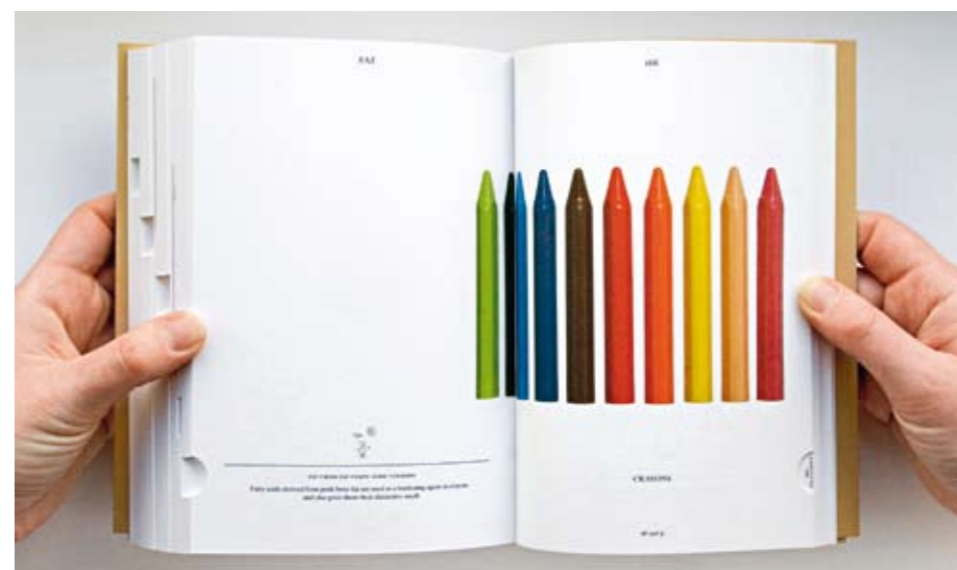
GH Now we're getting into designer political systems. Well, that's what stopping you. It's politics – not the design – it's the political system. How long did it take you to get the government to cooperate?

AA Four years. Which in a sense is nothing. And there is the power of the H-bomb: Harvard. Imagine what it means to drop the H-bomb in a meeting in Chile. I mean, when you're having problems with the politicians, what you have to say is, at Harvard what we do is ... and that's it! Then you get things done! But of course we had to use that power, because otherwise why would a minister listen to me? "Who are you to tell me what to do? Oh, well, if you're from Harvard, I might listen to you." Because the farther away you are the more powerful you are.

GH That's the thing that's stopping the scaling up of what you do is just politics. If you've got to explain and go through years and years to get one little 100 units planned every single time you do it – that's what's stopping the scaling.

AA Let me tell you another story. It's about the metro – did you know subways are socially non-profitable? It's the worst choice you can make in public transportation. Subways are always built by three big companies in Canada, Germany and France. They would argue that metro is the way to solve public transportation. Because the amount of money involved is about \$50 million per kilometre. In Chile we extended two big lines and they were \$2 billion. If you invested that money in a local bus system you would have so much money left over for projects with a social impact. But how do I explain that politically?

Far right Christian Meindertsma
Right and below Pig 05049, Meindertsma's book which follows all the products made from a single pig



I mean, progress is about a train – and so you go to things that are not logical but so human – it's about expectations. Because these decisions are taken by the president. Why, if the president is an intelligent guy, does he still choose the metro? A journalist friend of mine said because he was an only child – he dreams of grandeur.

JM The rhetoric these days is that politicians get design now, they're starting to pay lip service to it, business is starting to take interest in design – this is your field, right Bruce? Presenting design as a solution to business – being more efficient, more profitable and more beneficial to society. But then it comes down to some guy at the top who thinks, "I'm embarrassed by buses, I'll look better if I make trains". I'm interested in this idea of "design thinking". Is it just semantics? I'm not always sure what it has to do with design.

BN I disagree. When you talk about design thinking, that's very different from the rational and linear process that business schools teach and most businesses organise their operations around. Efficiency is not the most important thing in your life, but creativity, and the ability to get first-mover advantage by coming up with something new – that's where the fat profits are. So I see it as almost a way of approaching the world, and more than semantics. It's a true methodology. In fact, I'll go further and really

provoke you by saying that at Parsons we're talking about design thinking replacing the liberal arts. Because it is in many ways liberal arts plus making. The whole liberal arts education is really designed to make the individual think about his or her place in the world, not to act, and it's also about the individual as opposed to the social. And I would argue that design thinking places the whole paradigm within the social, within the cultural.

JM So design thinking is the new humanism?

BN Design thinking is the new humanism ... or it's the post-something-or-other!

GH So when do we have designers as governors?

JM Or, as Paulo Antonelli says, designers are the new intellectuals.

CM Design thinking, I hope, makes design in the future something that is applicable to a larger area than a plate or a glass. It would be thinking about the system around the product. In that sense I think this is super exciting because it means that our profession is changing and might become super interesting. What I find really a pity is that a lot of designers think it's such a drag to think about where these materials come from because it limits their freedom. Well, I think

it's just wonderful that we have a chance to do something different. I don't know exactly what it will be but I see it really positively. This might be a completely different field, especially if you think of younger designers and students, people who are growing up with the iPhone and other things that you can fill in yourself.

JM We're at a critical stage where we have a new access for design into the world, that's not just about stuff – and perhaps we haven't got the language to apply to it yet.

BN That's true. But what Alejandro is doing, to my mind, is design thinking. The fact that you're – if I may reinterpret you – creating, within the paradigm of housing, a platform that allows people to then create themselves, create their livelihood, their identity, you're co-creating with them and you're understanding their culture. These are all the essential elements to me of design thinking. I think a lot of great design thinking is happening outside of design and people are just calling it that.

GH Well they're calling it problem solving, which is what it has always been called. It's creatively thinking about solutions to problems and using a methodology born in industrial design and applying it instead to a healthcare system or an environmental disposal system or whatever it is. And, as you said, politicians pay lip service to



Meet the cast:
A B C D
E F G H I J K
L M N O P
Q R S T U V
W X Y Z

Right Gary Hustwit
Left and above Images
from Hustwit's films,
Helvetica (2007) and
Objectified (2009)



design thinking – everyone wants to be perceived as a design-driven company when they're really just a style-driven company. The only way to change that is to elect people that will openly espouse this kind of thinking.

BN In the US at any rate ... We were just in Seoul where they're creating a 20 million-person city. And when we were in Singapore the president was handing out design awards! You know, and in the Netherlands the political establishment has gotten it. Same thing in Denmark and Sweden – I mean, you do see some policy makers getting some of it. The US is the US – most of the things that happen in the US really have nothing to do with the government and maybe that's a good thing.

JM It's interesting because in the Netherlands they see design as a cultural export. In Singapore they're trying to create a design economy but they're doing it top-down as opposed to bottom-up so it will probably never work.

BN But it's a very interesting distinction. In terms of the consciousness of the political class.

CM It's not so much about design thinking ... I think it's basically that all big cities want to be a design city. That's the thing to be.

JM But now you have this phenomenon

where Bruce Mau gets invited to design the future of Guatemala.

CM Really?

BN Well that's hysterical!

CM Maybe the reason the language is vague is because you can't touch design thinking, it's a service. I don't know about Parsons [where Nussbaum teaches] but in the Netherlands art school is a level below university, so you're not expected to learn to reason things. For design thinking maybe people should go to a university level instead of a level of thinking that's more making things with your hands.

JM I think that's a really interesting point because while the practical level of education at design schools is very high, the academic level is quite low. I think that the idea of design thinking is that you can apply the analytical thinking that goes into objects to systems. You don't try to fix it, you try to design it from the beginning. At some point we're going to need new universities that teach this. There are exceptional people who can expand to other fields – the EU will go to Rem Koolhaas and say “rethink our flag” – but architects will get this more than designers.

[Gary Hustwit leaves to present a screening of his 2009 film Objectified.]

CM Yeah, that's what I also wanted to say – not to sort of diminish the power of intuitiveness, because of course that's a huge talent, but to connect that to an intellectual level is important. Because you have to pass these borders with economists and politicians and biologists and all these other professions that are really important and you have to at least be able to connect to those professions, which is complicated and takes a lot of time, and you can't expect a designer to know all this.

JM That's the problem – design means everything now.

BN You're uncomfortable with the dissolving of the hard shape of design and you're worried that it will become both amorphous and too widespread to have any intellectual consistency and power, is that right?

JM No, it's just getting difficult to talk about it. Personally, I find it deeply promising that these boundaries are dissolving. I mean, we need specialists, but the more people can work across boundaries the more creative potential we have.

CM As a writer that must also be very nice – you know that there's something coming.

JM The beauty of it for me is that design becomes a medium through which you can



IMAGE: MARTHA STEWART LIVING

Clockwise from left
Martha Stewart;
Bruce Nussbaum; left
to right, Nussbaum,
Meindertsma, Aravena
and McGuirk



talk about anything in the world.

CM Architects can work across the board because they make things but they also write texts about what they do and they're able to talk about it, which often designers aren't.

JM It's the total profession, isn't it? I mean, it provides avenues into so many other areas – you could go into politics through architecture if you go through social housing – it's happening! In fact, Alejandro, your business partner is now vice-minister of housing in Chile.

AA But he's an engineer. This particular government in Chile is mainly about engineers.

BN All the major people in China are engineers – ditto for Singapore and Korea.

JM Why isn't it engineering thinking then?

BN We could play that game ... it's mechanistic, it tends to be top-down, it tends to be massive. They do have a formal method of thinking.

CM That's really a nice point because it takes the vagueness out of design thinking. What engineers do is make the world understandable, they just sort of follow these logical lines. Like, the engineers who make the strange sausage in my book about the pig, where it's all different

meats glued together. They're proud of the sausage because for them it's an invention. They only think in their tiny area.

JM It's interesting to hear about all these engineers taking power. I wonder how design thinking is different from engineering thinking.

BN They've had the power for generations. In the US most CEOs have an engineering background, and a big chunk of that is military.

CM Maybe because engineers are not that much about visualising what they do, they're more sort of inside the object, and designers are much more about communicating what that is.

AA If I may simplify, and it might even be a caricature, I'm just trying to look at our own practice that has both an engineer and an architect. My partner frames what to do. I give form to how to do it. So the question design thinking deals with is “how?” The question engineering thinking deals with is “what?” So my partner will say, what do we do? Half of a good house instead of a small house. How? That's synthetic design. It synthesises what to do, and how to do it – and normally it's better explained with drawings than with words. But the common language we have is: why? Why should we do this? Is it relevant? Is it important? Is it just because it's cool? Well I don't care about it then,

I'll spend energy on something else. Can that thing resist the question “why?”

CM But I think in a lot of companies engineers wouldn't ask why. In your situation it's applicable but I think engineers are all about what and how.

AA Another way to put it is, “so what?” If I don't do this ... so what? If you take designing cities, it's because if I don't do this then we're in deep shit with two billion people.

CM Well, your presentation was the first time that I thought, wow, this is really necessary.

JM I think that's an interesting distinction because the “so what” question is inarguable – not all designers can claim to be doing work as important as yours. But the prospect of design thinking is that suddenly designers can operate on that level, where they are touching social problems. Because for the last century or more, design has been a moral aesthetics – it's been about having a certain taste and aspiring to a certain social standing – the Martha Stewart thing. You know, you glitter your candelabra because you want to impress your friends at dinner parties. Meanwhile some architects are thinking about housing poor people.

BN Designers can still choose to create beauty. Simply create beauty. †