The Design of Production

Ball Nogues forecasts a future architecture that is low-impact and easily convertible.

Text Terri Peters

"We fabricate everything that we design, and we design everything that we make," says Benjamin Ball, who together with creative partner Gaston Nogues established Ball Nogues Studio in 2004 in Los Angeles. "I like to say we occupy the space between the hammer and the mouse." The two met while studying architecture at SCI-Arc, although after graduation Ball worked as a production designer for films, including the Matrix series, and spent a few years at various architecture offices. Nogues worked at Frank Gehry's office for a decade before cofounding Ball Nogues. Thanks to their diverse backgrounds, Ball brings an element of storytelling and image-making to their work and Nogues an interest in materials, digital design and processes of fabrication. To date, the studio has been involved primarily in public art and sculptural installations. With its focus on craft and making, Ball calls what they do "the design of production." They have realized more than 20 projects since 2004, ranging from a collection of boulder-sized, mirror-polished metal balls suspended on the facade of a car park in Santa Monica (Cradle, 2010) to a reinterpreted Renaissance coffered ceiling composed of thousands of colored strings for the Venice Architecture Biennale (Echoes Converge, 2018).

Maximilian's Schell
Los Angeles / CA / USA
2005

A vortex-shaped, temporary outdoor installation at Los Angeles exhibition of various Materials & Applications warped the flow of space with a featherweight rendition of a celestial black hole. Hovering over the M.A.A. courtyard, Maximilian's Schell was a spectacle the site of an apartment building. Although constructed out of linted Mylar, the volume appeared to be made of stained glass. Visitors sought shade beneath the installation, which worked overhead for the entire summer of 2005.
I tend to move heavy objects a lot and, of course, stare at computer screens'.
It was about realizing their concept for critiquing and about expressing the flow of goods and consumption between countries. So we did it. We damned the gates and reversed it." The installation was dismantled and the shirts were given away on the final day of the fair, leaving only a pile of string.

This notion of designing for disassembly or reuse – or, as Nogues puts it, "designing for a double life – is a recurrent theme in Ball Nogues's work. Since their projects are many temporary installations for galleries, with the exception of a few shop interiors, they delight in creating ephemeral spaces that can just disappear or be repurposed in the original context. Their most innovative and architectural work to date is Table Cloth (2010), a summer installation that functioned as courtyard furniture, a stage set for outdoor performances, and a shading system that climbed part of a building façade. Not a cloth at all, Table Cloth comprised 500 coffee tables and three-legged stools installed in an open-air courtyard at UCLA and interconnected to form a "tapestry". The piece was intended to challenge the norm of mass production and consumption through the introduction of craft and differentiation. The furniture they used as building blocks did not come off an assembly line. Each unique table and chair was fabricated by Ball Nogues. Unlike many of their other projects, the installation explicitly incorporated function while creating a variety of social experiences, such as a theatre in the round, clustered meeting spaces and quiet areas. Fretted from the gallery environment, the installation of tables as cloth resembled smoothly flowing drapery as it climbed the facade to form a backdrop for musical performances.

Future works include a new version of Table Cloth for a gallery space (late 2013) and Air Garden, an enormous sitting installation that will hang in a light well at LAX Airport. Designed to correspond to the scale of the terminal, Air Garden will be nearly 25 m (80 ft) high. It's tempting to ask whether the pair can see themselves doing a huge airport project in one day. Are they willing to take on any commission, regardless of its size? "There is a scale we are not prepared to work at, like a soccer stadium or something equally absurd," says Ball. But they do see themselves adapting to a shift in scale and programme, yet still using their design and make skills. "At a larger scale, we could do a fair amount of pre-fabricating ourselves and could work with the fabricators to design a system for production." Being connected to the process of making is integral to their way of working. Although the work of Ball Nogues is always architectural – concerned with light, space, form and experience – it does not focus on buildings. Their academic way of presentation, which invariably communicates process and project visually even on their website, is part of a growing interest in experimental architecture that relates both to the designer as maker and to digital crafting. The work features a critical response to the current practice of architectural sustainability and forecasts a future architecture that is low-impact, easily convertible and aimed even more at process and concept.

Table Cloth
Los Angeles / CA / USA
2010

Table Cloth was a courtyard performance space at Schoenberg Hall, part of the UCLA Herb Alpert School of Music in Los Angeles. Ball Nogues designed and fabricated the installation, which served as an integrated set piece and seating area for student-musical performances and everyday social interaction. It contained hundreds of coffee tables and three-legged stools. Each piece was unique. At the end of the summer, visitors were encouraged to take the furniture home with them.