



Jiminez Lai's *White Elephant* on display at LoT, Louisville, KY. Photography by Magnus Lindqvist, Kyle D. Eberle and Kamil Krol.

# TRANSFORMATIONS INTERVIEW: A CONVERSATION WITH JIMINEZ LAI

BY JONATHAN WEST

In the midst of his early career, Jiminez Lai worried that his life was becoming staid from the day-to-day routines he found himself navigating. His response was to challenge the way he was living, and part of that challenge meant living in a desert shelter at Taliesin West in order to understand the benefits of paring down.

In recent years, Lai has built numerous installations, as well as being widely exhibited and published around the world, including the MoMA-collected *White Elephant*. His first manifesto, *Citizens of No Place*, was published by Princeton Architectural Press with a grant from the Graham Foundation. Draft II of this book has been archived at the New Museum as a part of the show *Younger Than Jesus*. In 2012, Jiminez Lai was awarded the Architectural League Prize for Young Architects as well as the Debut Award at the Lisbon Triennale in 2013. He will represent Taiwan in the 2014 Venice Architectural Biennale.

The time spent exploring a new way to live helped shape Jiminez's approach to architecture and design, and he made his work—and the work of his Chicago-based firm Bureau Spectacular—hard to compartmentalize in a single box. Diverse projects, multi-faceted installations, and a bold vision are some of the defining aspects of Jiminez Lai's reputation in the architecture and art worlds.

Jiminez Lai's work will be featured in the third installment in Clayco and Forum Studio's Art & Science

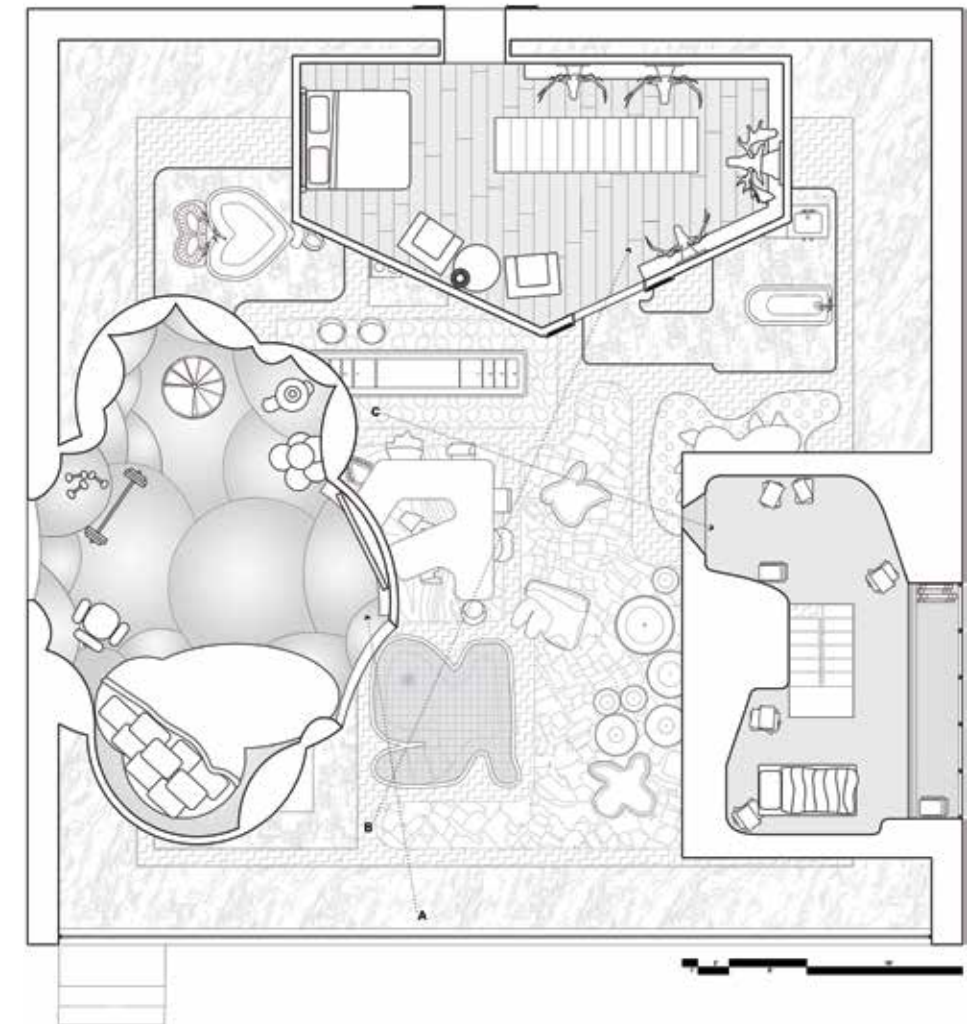
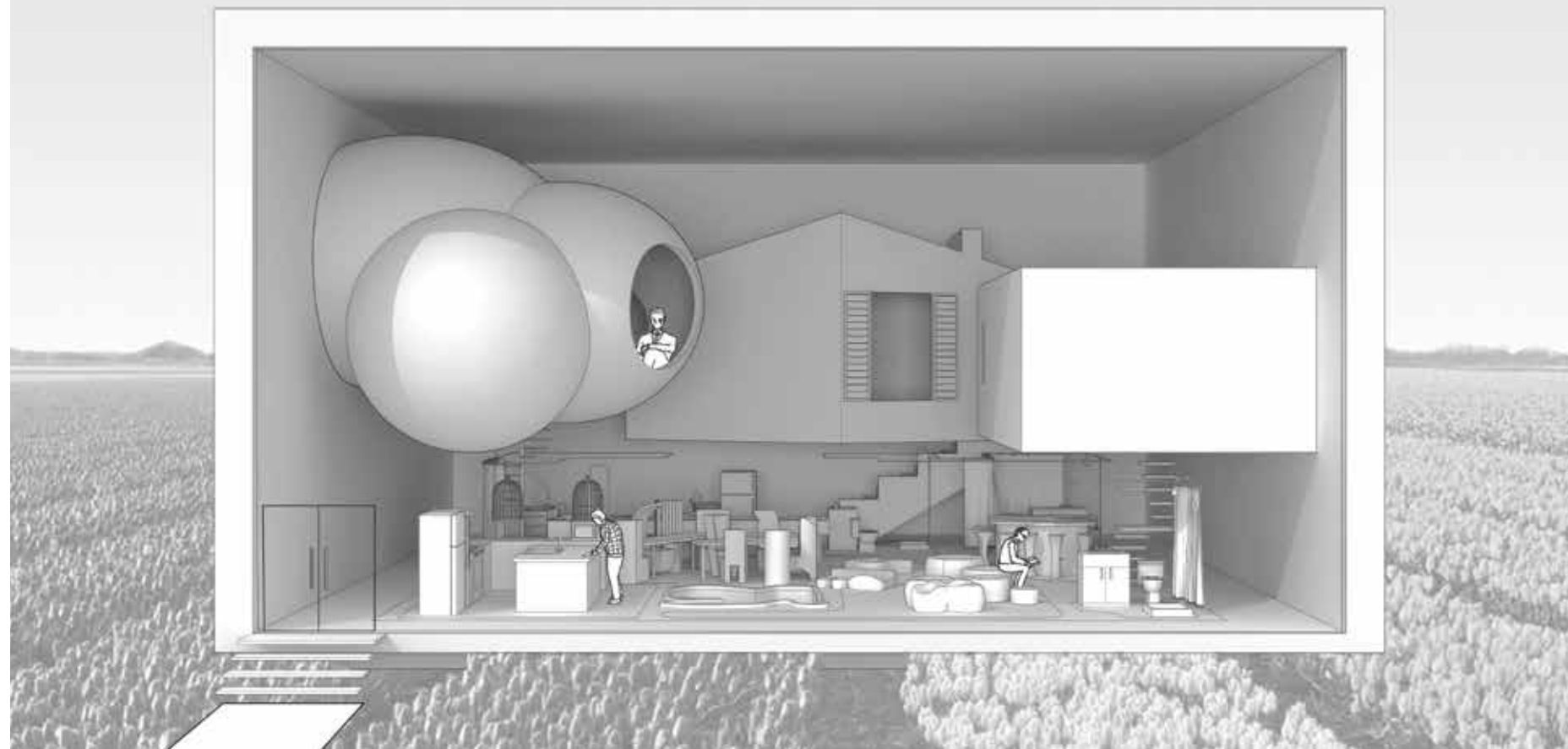


PHOTO BY JENNIFER AVELLO.

series opening in mid-May and concluding in late-July at the Clayco and Forum Studio Offices at 35 East Wacker in Chicago. The installation will feature framed and mounted graphic panels, mega-graphics applied directly to walls and floors, projections of sketches and models, and interpretive elements. The centerpiece of the exhibition will be a large-scale "graffito" measuring 144" by 84."

Lai recently presented as part of the 2014 Taliesin West Lecture Series, which focused on Architecture + New

Plans for Lai's Three Little Pigs installation.



Media. He elaborated on his approach to life and explained what takeaways came from paring down and understanding the essentials of daily life.

**How do you begin your approach to work as art or architecture?**

I always try to begin my work by remembering that this is about architecture architecture—even if the work the work itself may not be a building. From there, very basic principles are the constant questions I ask around plans, sections, figure-ground diagrams, and so forth.

**You're a young architect who is a great creative force. How do you think age will inform your work?**

I don't think of myself as being young anymore. I do remember actually feeling young, but not at this juncture in time.

That said, through my 20s and early 30s, I enjoyed many years of freedom to explore. During this journey, I produced many stories, drawings, installations, lectures, exhibitions, models and a book that are directly engaged in architecture or explore cartoonish sensibilities of architecture. It was a very good run. My young and innocent self pursued architecture purely for the sake of the architectural discipline, and it was many years of undistracted joy.

I fill my days with unfamiliar territories—and I am starting to become more familiar with quite a few areas in which I hope to become more skilled. From curatorial work to academic writing to designing actual buildings, I have experienced quite a learning curve during the past few months. Who knows what the world will bring next? I consider uncertainty to be a luxury in life.

**You took a year off, and part of that involved living in a shelter at Taliesin West and a shipping container in Rotterdam. Why?**

In my early 20s, I had an idea that my day-to-day status quo was starting to feel stale, and it was going to cause me long-term problems if I did not understand a wider variety of points of views that this vast world offers. I was determined to find a way to clear my world of my normal surroundings, and launch myself somewhere that I could learn to live in extreme inconvenience. It happened in the forms of the desert shelter and the shipping container. I wanted to decontextualize myself into a vacuum and use it to allow my studies to become more organized and distilled.

**What can everyone learn from minimalist living?**

My experience at Taliesin West and Atelier Van Lieshout

taught me that I did not need a lot of material things in life. I was a very young man with one bag and one suitcase. The many worldly possessions I felt the compulsion to acquire suddenly felt meaningless. My wants and needs became very few and targeted, and I was able to condense my actions towards those few things. The application of this clarity to my life and work was incredibly useful.

**Bureau Spectacular, your Chicago-based firm, has some interesting projects in the works. What are your favorites?**

In the past five years, we have worked on nearly 100 individual projects—most of them are unrealized, some got built in the form of installations. It is hard to name just a few projects, since I liked almost all of them. *White Elephant* was a great project, as was *Speechbuster 99*



Interacting with conceptual furniture in Jiminez Lai's Speechbuster 99 Chairs.

*Chairs* with Storefront for Art and Architecture. I also really enjoyed working on the Taiwan Pavilion this year for the Venice Biennale. *Three Little Pigs* is also one of my favorites.

**If you had a year to study with Frank Lloyd Wright, what would you hope to take away from the experience?**

I would have liked to learn about abstraction from Mr. Wright. Some of my favorite Wright projects include The Guggenheim and the columns for the Johnson Wax Building. The circle, as an abstract shape with rich potentials, worked as circulation in the form of a helix at the Guggenheim. It was a large enough of an involuted upward ascension where the consumption of art is coupled with

the curiosity of people-watching. I would also have liked to learn about the gradual transitions between the stages of his career. It is a courageous and difficult act to reinvent oneself, and Mr. Wright did this several times in his lifetime.

