

# Snarkitecture *Design Studio*

Words by Allison Taylor

Photography by Brad Ogbonna

Enter this deserted house  
But please walk softly as you do.  
Frogs dwell here and crickets too.

Ain't no ceiling, only blue.  
Jays dwell here and sunbeams too.

Floors are flowers - take a few.  
Ferns grow here and daisies too.

Whoosh, swoosh - too-whit, too-woo,  
Bats dwell here and hoot owls too.

Ha-ha-ha, hee-hee, hoo-hoooo,  
Gnomes dwell here and goblins  
too.

And my child, I thought you knew  
I dwell here... and so do you.

Looking out on the stark white landscape of *Fun House*, a retrospective commemorating ten years of the collaborative design studio, Snarkitecture, a children's poem by Shel Silverstein comes to mind. The lines, at once comforting and haunting, summon visions of a creaking structure given over to the elements—a house as metaphor for a world filled with beauty, hidden dangers, and of course, people. Standing empty in the Great Hall of the National Building Museum in Washington, D.C., *Fun House* seems more a playground for ghosts than the living, but fill it with hundreds of visitors and watch as the installation lives up to its name.

Snarkitecture has built an internationally acclaimed practice around creating experiences that blur the lines between nostalgia and novelty. Partners Daniel Arsham, Alex Mustonen, and Ben Porto describe their work as a collaborative enterprise positioned between art and architecture. Snarkitecture traces its origins back to the early 2000s, when Arsham and Mustonen met at Cooper Union in New York studying art and architecture, respectively. "There's a lot of crossover with students there," Arsham explains. "Alex and I started discussing a collaboration that would sit in between the two disciplines and sort of be both and neither at the same time."

The two established Snarkitecture as a formal practice in 2008 and brought on Porto, who had studied at the Graduate School of Architecture at Columbia University, in 2014. The trio has since made a name for themselves as innovators and disruptors, bringing their experiential installations to the forefront of social, spatial, and architectural discourse. Over the past ten years, their distinctive creations have featured prominently at Salone del Mobile, the New Museum, Design Miami, Interior Design Show in Toronto, the National Building Museum, and more.

Snarkitecture takes its name from a whimsical poem by Lewis Carroll, another children's author, entitled *The Hunting of the Snark*, in which an eccentric crew goes in search of an elusive and dangerous creature. Like those adventurers, the partners of Snarkitecture are in search of the elusive equilibrium between the





Fun House  
 Summer 2018  
 Exhibition for National Building Museum  
 Washington, D.C.  
 Photographs by Noah Kalina



Topographies  
 March 2017  
 Wallpaper collection for Calico Wallpaper  
 Photographs by Noah Kalina



familiar and the unknown, the past and the future, the mundane and the extraordinary. Their interactive environments invite a diverse audience to gather, play, and contemplate the ways in which space and design shape our experience of the everyday world.

Since their early days, Snarkitecture has grown to include a dedicated studio of artists and architects, whose collaborative process helps to bring their ideas to life. "When new projects come in, we tend to sit the whole studio down with a pencil and paper and throw out ideas," says Porto. "Even when projects get complicated and bigger, keeping it simple is always best. It's nice to see everyone sketch, call it after half an hour, and move forward to keep anything from getting too overworked."

At the heart of Snarkitecture's mission to dissolve architectural boundaries is the importance of play for all ages. The team consistently facilitates a feeling of childlike curiosity, which encourages visitors to interact with the space and each other. "There is a pure sense of wonder in being able to explore," says Mustonen. "Finding a space between play and quieter reflection is something we hope for."

In creating an immersive installation called *The Beach*, in 2015, Snarkitecture produced 750,000 clear recyclable balls to fill the expansive Great Hall at the National Building Museum. The team considered each element of a typical beach, down to the feeling of sand underfoot, the crashing of waves, and the sensation of floating in the water.

"Everything was detailed, down to what your feet on the turf feel like and sound like, to make you think of an actual trip to the beach," Porto recalls. "We used this white AstroTurf material that feels like sand on your feet, and it has a bit of a noise to it. When you jump into the spheres, there's so many that it does sound like waves crashing. And sitting in it does kind of feel like floating."

While the individual aspects may sound complicated, the experience of jumping into a ball pit summons the simple feeling of childhood, combined with memories of days spent jumping waves and exploring tidepools by the sea. "[The experience] is relevant to many different ages," says Arsham. "The kids are sort of acting as themselves, while the adults are acting as kids."

The trio has a propensity for using white or clear materials. "In many cases we're exploring a reductive architecture and space," Mustonen says, "either through a reduction in the palette, color, or material." Continuing that thought, Arsham describes white as

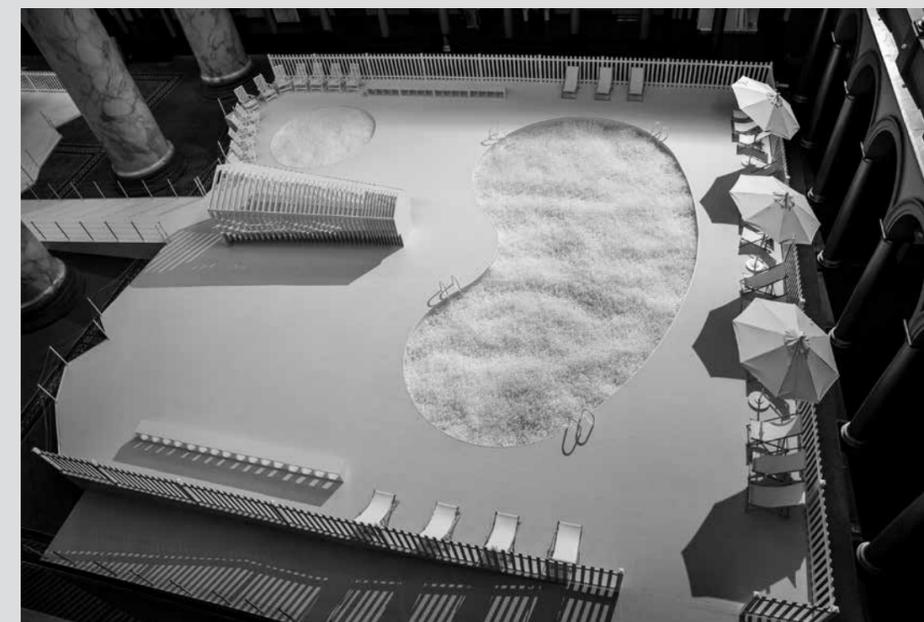
a "zero" of architectural surfaces. "In many cases, we have used color reduction as a way to create spaces that allow inhabitants to engage more with the physicality of the space, rather than the surface, treatment, pattern, or color."

This aesthetic hallmark is often matched with repetition. "There's a standby of the old Snarkitecture days where we have a budget and say, 'Let's take the whole thing and buy as many of one item as we can,'" Porto says. "So if we have X, let's get as many marble run boxes as possible, spray-paint them white, and make a mountain out of it." The multiplicity effect is particularly powerful when magnified to the extent of installations like *The Beach*, or when employed in the comparably small confines of retail spaces. These undertakings have allowed the firm to enter into a community that includes other individuals and brands in the creative disciplines of fashion, art, design, and music.

Over the past few years, Snarkitecture has worked with Ronnie Fieg, founder and creative director of streetwear brand Kith, on flagship stores in New York, Los Angeles, and Miami. Hanging from the ceiling in each location are hundreds of cast Air Jordan 6 replicas, a nod to the retailer's early beginnings in footwear. "When we're doing a project with Kith, which is more of a functional retail environment, certainly there are more requirements for those spaces that we're designing to," says Arsham. "At the end of the day it's installation, but at the same time, it reflects the sensibility of the



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brand in a more direct way.”

Snarkitecture’s collaboration with Swedish fashion brand Cos is more abstract by comparison. Cos engages audiences through design and selective events—subtler channels than a traditional advertising campaign. A mutual appreciation for reduction and simplicity makes the partnership a natural fit. Last year marked Snarkitecture’s third installation for the brand, a lilac marble run at the Gana Art Gallery of Seoul, South Korea. *Loop* comprises four metal tracks suspended from the ceiling of an otherwise white gallery space. Every ten seconds, a white marble is released from a hole in the wall so that several marbles are allowed to snake their way through a complex series of slides, creating a sonic backdrop of white noise. They eventually travel through a hole in the wall to a separate room, landing finally in a “scattered sea,” where another hole in the ground slowly funnels them back to the start.

“Retail has changed a lot,” Porto remarks. “Everything is online now. I think that’s really opened up design possibilities. Brands are recognizing that [the storefront] is not their number one public-facing display, so the spaces get to be more interesting. Now it’s less about putting stuff on shelves, and more about making an environment that connects with clients.”

In January, Snarkitecture revealed a collaboration with quartz manufacturer Caesarstone at the Interior Design Show in Toronto. A series of kitchen islands made of different versions of Caesarstone’s quartz surface material. *Altered States* references water in its various forms. “The water and the temporal nature of that project were directed to the idea of the kitchen, cooking, freezing, and washing,” Porto says. “It was very interesting to be able to simplify things to their basic nature.”

*Ice Island* was particularly notable, featuring 37 layers of black Caesarstone curved up around a central sphere of ice like the terraced rice fields of Sa Pa, Vietnam. The frozen sphere is cooled from below but melts under the touch of visitors.

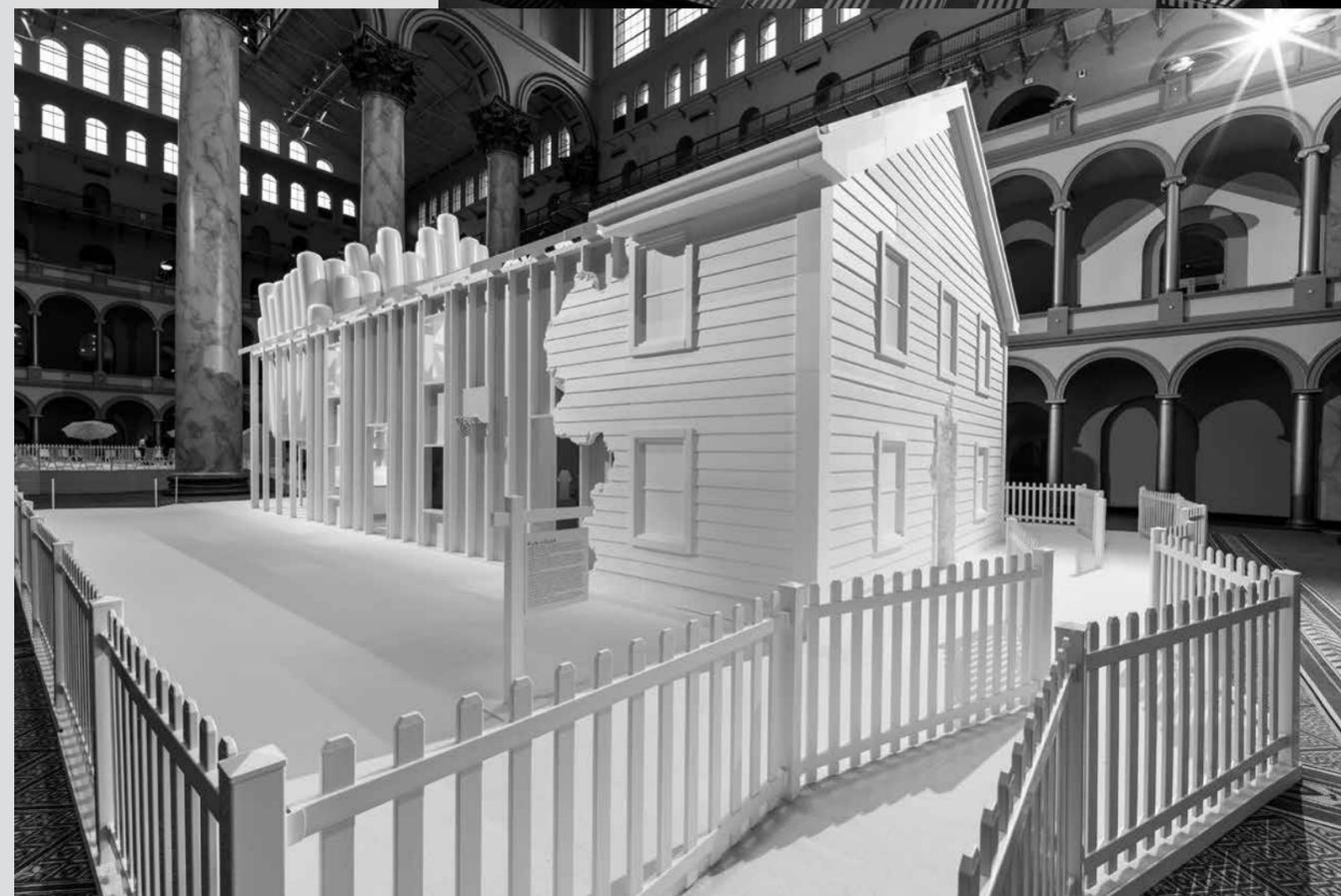
In April, Snarkitecture and Caesarstone unveiled a new

installation at the Palazzo dell’Ufficio Elettorale di Porta Romana during Milan Design Week. This version of *Altered States* focused on one central island that unites three states of water: ice, liquid, and steam. An undulating congregation of wire mesh platforms made for sitting encompassed the dramatic centerpiece, providing a visually engaging and entirely functional space for audience members.

All of these works tie into *Fun House*, which is on display at the National Building Museum through December and will likely travel in the coming years. The expansive exhibition grants museum guests access to a series of unique Snarkitecture environments; rooms feature past installations like *Dig* (2011), *Drift* (2012), *Memorial Bowling* (2012), and *Playhouse* (2017). The works are at once personal and elevated, with experiential qualities designed to remind audience members of childhood and everyday architecture, while encouraging reflection and reexamination. Due to the public nature of a museum setting, the energy of the space changes with the crowds that come through its doors.

“People engaging with art and architecture is important to us,” Porto says, “but people engaging with other people is important as well. When you’re working with a reduced palette, the people become the color, they become the action.”

Enter this peculiar house, no longer deserted. Walk softly, if you’d like—or run through the halls like a child, welcoming the familiar and strange. This place is open to all.





Altered States  
April 2018  
Installation for Caesarstone  
Milan, Italy  
Photographs by David Zanardi