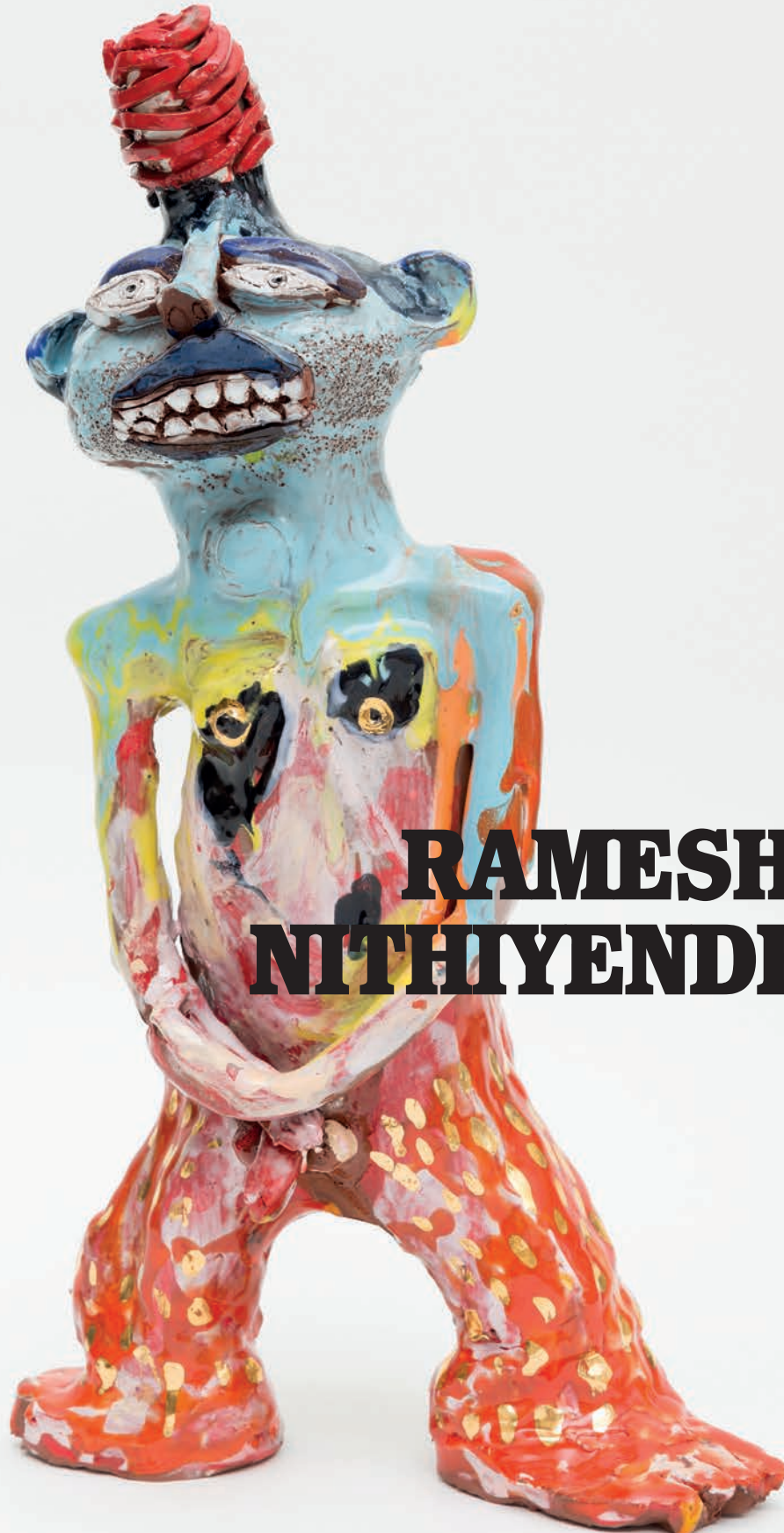


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# BUILDING SIBLING NATION

Laterally minded design and architecture collective SIBLING is forging spaces where people and ideas intersect.

By Katya Wachtel



The redbrick building at number four Wood Street, Fitzroy began its life as a clothing factory, but sometime during the 20th century it became a magnet for architects and urbanists. Prior tenants have included the experimental and often controversial architect Ivan Rijavec (a curvilinear interior wall stands as a lasting symbol of his occupancy) and Rory Hyde, who's now the Curator of Contemporary Architecture and Urbanism at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. The current tenant, design collective SIBLING, took up residency in 2013.

The two-storey building in Melbourne's inner-north butts up against a narrow park called Condell Reserve, which in 2010 received government approval to remain an open space until at least 2060.

"The park used to have terraces on it, opposite here," says Timothy Moore, one of SIBLING's founders, gesturing to the grassy expanse and the row of small, low-slung houses beyond it. At the western end of the reserve stands the grand, grey Fitzroy Town Hall – a fitting neighbour for an architecture studio with such a strong civic remit. "City council is trying to build more pocket parks because there's not much green space in this area," he says. It's a plan Moore and SIBLING – who are serious advocates of shared public space – would no doubt endorse.

Founded in 2012 by four men and four women – Amelia Borg, Jonathan Brener, Jessica Brent, Jane Caught, Qianyi Lim, Alan Ting, Nicholas Braun and Moore – SIBLING designs spaces that aim to stimulate human interaction and connectedness. "What drives us is a desire to be social," says Moore. "That comes from having eight founding members. There's complicated relationships, but the idea of the-more-people-the-better has subtly penetrated our work as well." Moore is softly spoken but forthright and looks kind of like Daniel Day-Lewis with a beard.

There's no strict hierarchy at SIBLING, and only five of the eight founders work here full-time. There are usually one, two or three people driving a project and "people jump in when they see fit", says Moore. Their client roster includes fashion brands, art galleries, media companies and homeowners, all of whom vary in scale, and key projects have included retail interiors for Kloke, Archive and PAM, and exhibition environments for the NGV *Melbourne Now* Reading Room and Archizines/Public Offer at RMIT Design Hub.

"We still do backyard renovations," Moore says, as if to underscore the fact that not all their projects take the form of whimsical, geodesic pavilions hovering in the trees in the Netherlands (there's only one of those) or technicolour wearable tents (so far there's only one of those too). But even their residential works are radical in premise.

Take, for example, a home renovation in Carlton North. SIBLING plans to bring the backyard to the front of the house and then move it up to the second storey. For a residence in coastal Victoria, meanwhile, the proposed design elongates a street-facing veranda so that the main outdoor living area is now at the front and no longer in the back – "where it's all private and no-one's seeing one another", says Nicholas Braun, another one of SIBLING's founders.

In each development, SIBLING is trying to reduce the barriers between inhabitant and public. They want their designs to engender greater interaction between strangers and neighbours, whether passively or actively. The front door or gate or garden or fence is much more than a threshold to a private home – it's a potential social zone.

When SIBLING registered as an architecture practice in 2012, it had no manifesto – the founders simply wished to work for themselves instead and with each other. According to Braun, their tendency toward the experimental "just happened".

He and Moore feel that SIBLING's alternative approach – relative, at least, to many other commercial design studios – is a natural consequence of having produced much of their early work in a gallery context, building installation-based pieces for group shows in which they were free to test boundaries in a way that's not always possible when a client is involved.

"We're designers," Braun says definitively. "We would never suggest that we're artists." Their earlier gallery works were "always more spatial in their explorations".

SIBLING's spatial explorations do, however, often feel like a fine art installations: giant white snow puffs at Federation Square; inflatable triangular forms that merge into a pillowy river flowing through a gallery; a futuristic social experiment using an adaptation of the Faraday cage. "We see an expanded definition of architecture," says Moore. "When you come down to the root of what

**"SIBLING IS TRYING TO REDUCE THE BARRIERS BETWEEN INHABITANT AND PUBLIC."**

SIBLING  
*On/Off*, 2013  
Melbourne, Australia  
Photos: Tobias Titz



SIBLING  
*Whiteout*, 2014  
Federation Square, Melbourne

Photo: Jason Micheluzzi

Below  
SIBLING  
*DUST*, 2014  
Melbourne, Australia  
Photos: Peter Bennetts

**“WHERE WE ARE AT THE MOMENT IS A TESTING GROUND FOR BIGGER AND BETTER THINGS. IT’S A REALLY EXPERIMENTAL TIME FOR US TO DEVELOP OUR PRACTICE AND THE WAY WE THINK ABOUT ARCHITECTURE”**



SIBLING  
*DUST*, 2014  
Melbourne, Australia  
Photos: Peter Bennetts  
& Tobias Titz



architecture is, it’s actually about the organisation of space. So we would argue that could be anything from a book, to a building, to a design strategy, to an event or a party.”

The studio’s eight members are influenced by different architectural moments, but the 1960s countercultural movement in America and the 1970s radical design movement in Italy “float up” frequently, Moore says. Japanese contemporary architects like SANAA are “in the back of our mind” also.

“We’re not looking for the aesthetic – we’re looking for the strategies they used,” he then clarifies. “How did they explore space? What can we learn in terms of spatial considerations? It’s not so much about the formality of it.”

SIBLING’s modern-day Faraday cage was part-exhibition, part-research project, part-event and part-design. The project, called *On/Off*, explored the notion of the possibilities of disconnection in a hyper-connected world and whether it’s even important.

The hyper-reflective installation had the appearance of a science fiction set – the type of space that would be perfect for a music video set in the 22nd century. Imagine an enormous cube clad in mirrors in a bright red jungle gym, in the middle of a room with a two-dimensional red grid lining the walls. The original Faraday cage stops electromagnetic charges from reaching the interior; SIBLING’s version blocked smartphone reception. The designers watched with interest as visitors immediately reached for their phones upon exiting the quiet, humble dead-zone inside the cube, and quickly uploaded photos to Instagram.

“*On/Off* does suggest a binary but really there’s no binary at all. With the technology we have today, we live on our phones, but out in the world,” Moore says. This leads, of course, to an isolation of sorts – a reduced presence despite physical attendance.

SIBLING is interested in the iterative process, and ideas the collective explored in earlier works often return on a bigger scale in later projects. Motifs used in *On/Off*, for example, are recognisable

in *DUST*, a “multisensory retail concept” for which SIBLING designed a bricks-and-mortar presence in Melbourne’s CBD last year. The design is a meditation on line and space that straddles the masculine and feminine, the complex and the clean. The journey begins at street level, where a dramatic grid of neon light dives toward the lower level, encouraging passers-by to take a trip below.

Inside the space, there’s a seemingly infinite three-dimensional grid of painted white metal, projected into endlessness by a floor to ceiling mirror at one end and other reflective surfaces throughout the room. The artistry of the grounded structure is that it feels as if it’s suspended from above. Perforated white boxes that are part of that same framework emit perfume when a person walks by and triggers the atomiser. LED screens show hypnotic video art. It’s less retail store, more sensory experience, and that’s the point.

SIBLING will be busy again in 2015. In addition to a number of residential projects and the completion of a project space for Gertrude Contemporary, they are also working on the new *Vice/i-D* offices, the largest office space they have designed to date.

“We see ourselves as emerging as an architecture practice, at the very centre of the architectural conversation,” Moore says. “Where we are at the moment is a testing ground for bigger and better things. It’s a really experimental time for us to develop our practice and the way we think about architecture.”

Over the summer, SIBLING hosted a meeting at MPavilion in Melbourne’s Queen Victoria Gardens, opposite the National Gallery of Victoria, in which children recreated Melbourne architectural landmarks with their bodies – inspired by a Japanese trio who developed so-called “architectural gymnastics” to help kids learn about architecture. Given SIBLING’s engagement with the educational community, and their propensity to try new things, it’s not all that much of a surprising collaboration. In fact, it feels exactly like them. **V**

[siblingnation.net](http://siblingnation.net)