

# ARCHITECT

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INFRASTRUCTURE OF HOPE

MORGAN STATION



NEXT PROGRESSIVES

## MAKING NO LITTLE PLANS

WITH A RESEARCH-DRIVEN APPROACH THAT ENCOMPASSES ROBOTICS AND FABRICATION, FUTURE CITIES LAB IS PUSHING THE THEORETICAL BOUNDARIES OF PRACTICE.

Text by Lisa Huxley  
Photo by Ian Allen

KOMAR NARAYANAN, 35, and Jason Kelly Johnson, 39, founded their practice in 2009 with a name that embodies their multiscalaed, wide-ranging ambitions: Future Cities Lab. The firm, based in San Francisco, and with an outpost in Gettengo's hometown of Athens, Greece, is harnessing sophisticated technologies to address pressing urban issues such as migration and population growth, food and energy shortages, extreme and unpredictable weather, and rising sea levels.

The two partners, who got married after meeting as students at the Princeton University School of Architecture, view the city as a complex ecology and the role of the architect as being grounded in ethics. "Our projects evolve from thinking about how cities should be," Gettengo says. "We see it as our responsibility to envision the future."

The setting for these experiments is a loft in the semi-industrial Dogpatch neighborhood of San Francisco. The space—part conventional office, part electronics lab, part workshop—is a study in ordered chaos. "All our fabrication is done in-house," Gettengo says. "We love experimenting and making things."

Cabinets full of wires, circuit boards, and actuators line the walls, as do bins piled high with hammers, planes, screwdrivers, and other tools. A freestanding clean room houses a CNC router and a laser cutter. The partners view every project, model, and competition as an opportunity to explore unconventional and leading-edge technologies. "We see firm believes in the roomy city of design research and speculative practices," Gettengo says. "In fact," Johnson adds, "we have structured our lives around this."

To support their burgeoning practice, both partners teach architecture at the California College of the Arts. Gettengo and Johnson have collaborated with various

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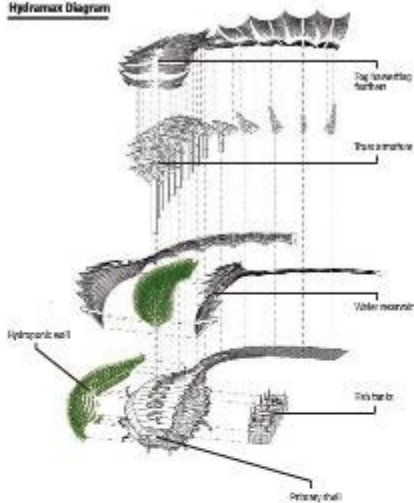
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experts—material engineers, computer interface designers, and paleobiologists—as they have pursued a range of effects: design/build projects, the prototyping of digital and electronic technologies, and host-baiting in many contexts, including a small host of gallery installations and temporary structures. Johnson also collaborated with architect Andy Payne to design *Flowfly*, a set of software tools that augments the design capabilities of Grasshopper (a free Rhino plug-in).

The firm has won its share of honors, including the Architectural League's 2001 Prize for Young Architects and Designers, and the partners were named 2009 New York Prize Fellows at the Van Alen Institute. Visionary practices such as Future Cities Lab can make profound contributions to architecture by shifting and expanding how we understand the boundaries of the discipline. But the firm's biggest challenge remains: How to segue from more-or-less pure experimentation into the design and construction of actual buildings—a transition that Gehry and Johnson's former professor at Princeton, Jesse Lerner, AIA, and the Diller, once made themselves.

"Our practice model is inspired by practices like Pritzker's and Diller's that are research driven and speculative. Both of them pushed and pushed until the work was material, spatial, public, and urban. In each case, the body of research aggregated to produce a very potent kind of architecture," Johnson says. "In the end, we want to make space, to make buildings. We love the challenge of actually making what we are thinking about, of getting down to the details and imagining how it happens in time and space."

### Hydrax Diagram



Hydrax was exhibited at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art as part of a 2009 show entitled "The Urban Imprint."



**Hydrax: Port Machine** Exhibited at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art as part of a 2009 show entitled "The Urban Imprint." Hydrax is a proposal for how the San Francisco waterfront can respond to rising sea levels. Rather than barricade the city with dikes and seawalls, Hydrax offers a radical edge with responsive, biological inspired architecture—aquatic parks, gardens, and wildlife refuges—that harness the water for drinking, power, and food production. The model displayed at the museum incorporates motion sensors that, when triggered by visitors, cause the facade's solar collectors and photovoltaics to wobble slowly in the air.



**Datagrow** A social media "white party wall," as the architects describe the project, Datagrow was exhibited last year outside the San Jose, Calif., opera house. The installation monitors trending Twitter feeds in Silicon Valley and, when visitors approach, loads down them on LCD displays and over speakers. The firm designed and fabricated a 170 digital and electronic equipment and activation.



**Energy Farm** Designed for a 2005 competition in Seoul, South Korea, Energy Farm explores the role of architecture in the city's physical, cultural, and environmental acceptance. The hypothetical structure uses responsive technologies to enhance and boost the environmental and energy performance, making it responsible to user needs on a microscale.



**Axiom** Also designed for a 2009 exhibition at the Van Alen Institute, Axiom, like Clabshaw, highlights the global warming crisis. The exhibit, composed of a web of cables, LEDs, and bio-solar panels, is a spatial representation of the Arctic ice cap that includes real-time data on ice field movement. The project lights up in response to viewers—a metaphor for our complicity in climate change.



**Super Galaxy** This post-apocalyptic reimaging of Trump Tower in New York City is a classic visionary sketch, both fantastical but also grounded enough in pragmatism—with a workable structure and scale model—to make it seem like a real possibility. A network dwelling with sleeping pods and a suspended hotel, the architects of Super Galaxy envision and capture wide energy.



**Clabshaw** Clabshaw at the Van Alen Institute in New York in 2009. Clabshaw reflects the firm's engagement with responsive technologies, experimental materials, and end-user issues—namely climate change in the Arctic. A block of ice holds the irregularly shaped structure, covered with a plastic skin, slowly melts—the sound amplifying and speeding up when visitors approach.



**Tilted** This art installation, conceived last year by the Museum of Craft and Design in San Francisco, was displayed at Fray's exhibition space. Exhibition project in Hayes Valley that featured food-walkers because it transformed shipping containers. The project explored fabrication, factory use and served as a gathering place for visitors, who could walk inside the left off road.