PIN–UP

SPRING SUMMER 2018

MAGAZINE FOR ARCHITECTURAL ENTERTAINMENT ISSUE 24

USD 20.00

Featuring

Amanda Levete, Dozie Kanu & Jonathan Olivares, William Scott, and Frida Escobedo

ALSO: Matt Ager, Laida Aguirre, Arakawa Gins, Dora Budor, Achille Castiglioni, Christophe Delcourt, Florian Graf, Grafton Architects, Elias Hansen, Andrés Jaque, Donald Judd, Sigve Knutson, Paul Kopkau, Hannah Levy, Mary Little, Issey Miyake, Rich Mnisi, Pezo von Ellrichshausen, Jessi Reaves, Andy Robertson, René Roubíček, Chris Schanck, Bořek Šípek, Snarkitecture, Soft Baroque, Ian Stell, Sam Stewart, Katie Stout, Zhipeng Tan, Anna Uddenberg, Wentrcek & Zebulon, Robert Yang, and Cajsa von Zeipel.

ISSN 1933-9755

THE MENTAL ISSUE

PIN–UP

SPRING SUMMER 2018

ISSN 1933-9755

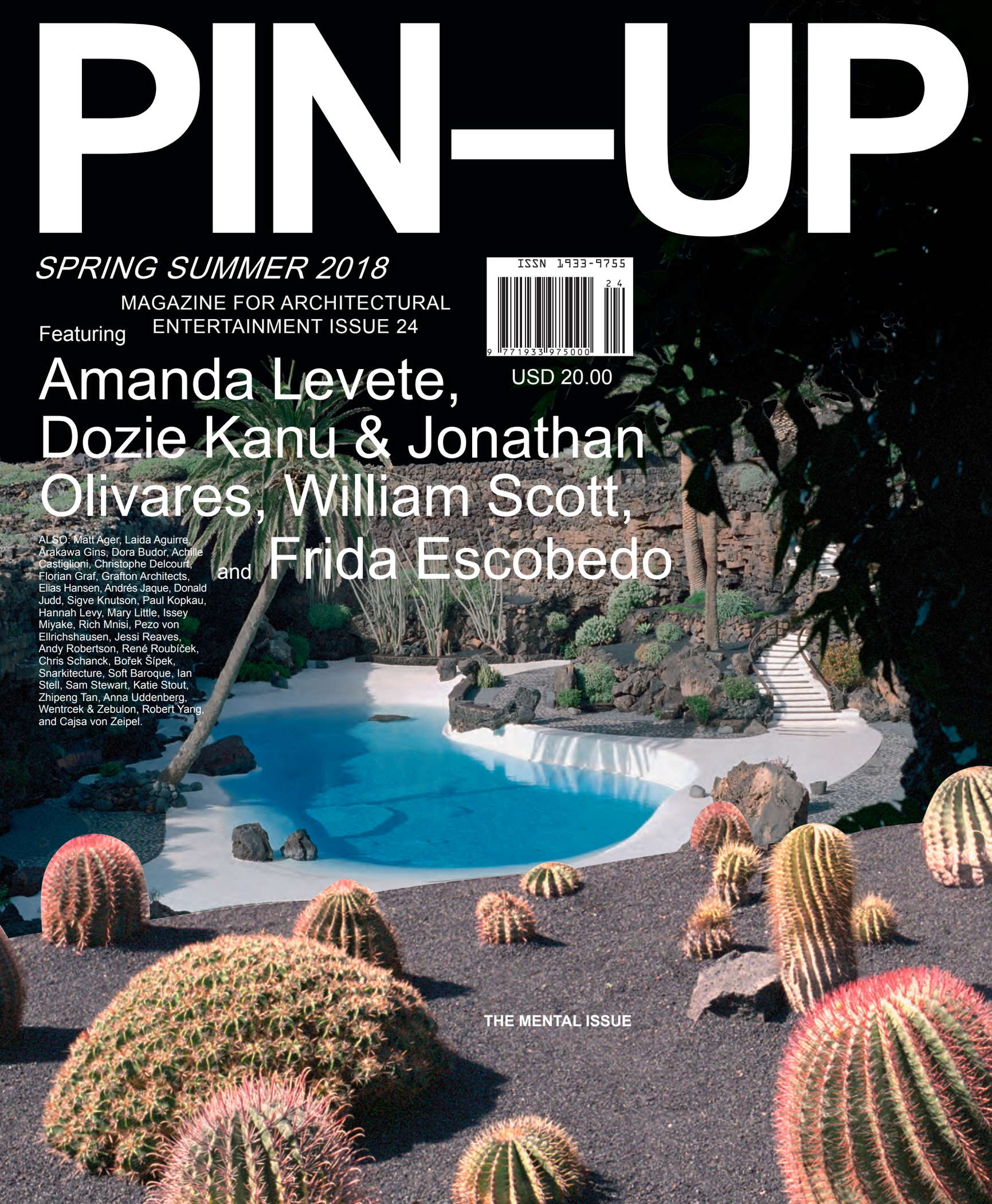
MAGAZINE FOR ARCHITECTURAL ENTERTAINMENT ISSUE 24

USD 20.00

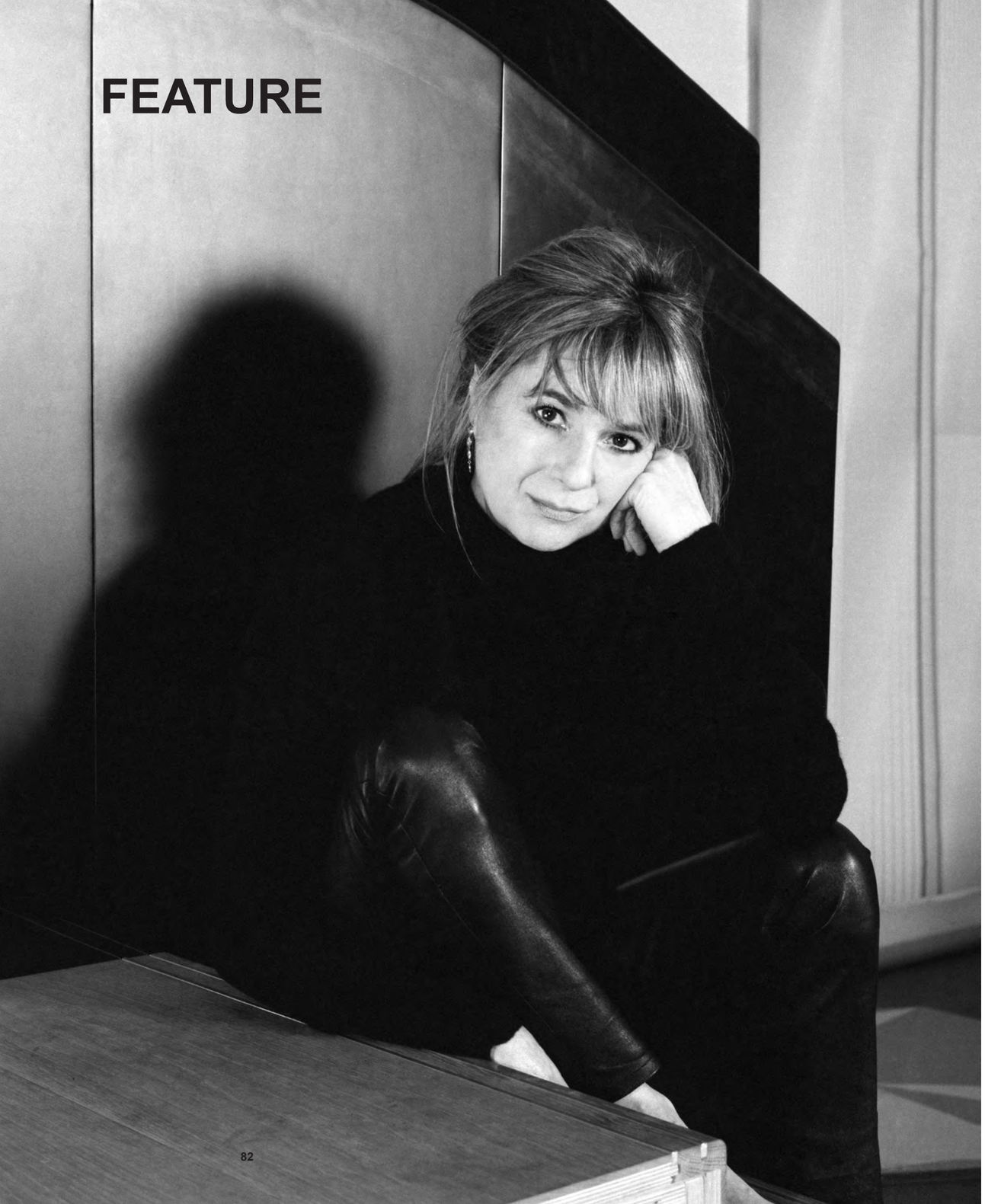
Featuring

Amanda Levete, Dozie Kanu & Jonathan Olivares, William Scott, and Frida Escobedo

ALSO: Matt Ager, Laida Aguirre, Arakawa Gins, Dora Budor, Achille Castiglioni, Christophe Delcourt, Florian Graf, Grafton Architects, Elias Hansen, Andrés Jaque, Donald Judd, Sigve Knutson, Paul Kopkau, Hannah Levy, Mary Little, Issey Miyake, Rich Mnisi, Pezo von Ellrichshausen, Jessi Reaves, Andy Robertson, René Roubíček, Chris Schanck, Bořek Šípek, Snarkitecture, Soft Baroque, Ian Stell, Sam Stewart, Katie Stout, Zhipeng Tan, Anna Uddenberg, Wentrcek & Zebulon, Robert Yang, and Cajsa von Zeipel.



THE MENTAL ISSUE



Interview
Felix Burrichter
Photography
Mathilde Agius

AMANDA LEVETE

With a range of new global projects to her name, this British architectural powerhouse has decidedly come into her own.

Amanda Levete Architects designed the celebrated new courtyard entrance to the Victoria & Albert Museum (V&A) in London. The model, which was photographed in the architect's studio, shows Sir Aston Webb's colonnade on Exhibition Road, through which access is gained to the new public plaza and its café. Over 10,000 porcelain tiles were used for the plaza's surfaces, a subtle nod to the V&A's world-renowned porcelain galleries.

Photography by Mathilda Agius for PIN–UP.

2009 was a tough year for the world economy, but it was a particularly bleak one for British architect Amanda Levete. She had lived (and worked) through a painful personal and professional separation from her husband Jan Kaplický, with whom she had for many years run the award-winning partnership Future Systems. Among some of their most iconic built projects were the Selfridges in Birmingham (2003), an amoeba-like blob of a building clad in shiny aluminum disks, and the aluminum entrance tunnel to the Comme des Garçons flagship store in New York's Meatpacking District (1998). Then Kaplický unexpectedly died in January 2009, adding grief to Levete's woes and leaving her with both a legacy and a name (her own) to defend during the worst financial crisis in living memory. To say that, a decade later, she has turned her fate around is an understatement. Amanda Levete Architects (or AL_A, in short) has within the past year alone completed two major cultural projects — a large-scale extension to the Museum of Art, Architecture, and Technology (MAAT) in Lisbon, finalized in March 2017, and a new entrance and underground gallery at the storied Victoria & Albert Museum (V&A) in London, on Exhibition Road, which opened with much fanfare last July. The same year, she completed Central Embassy, a mixed-use tower in downtown Bangkok, and her many other projects currently in development include a cancer-treatment center in Southampton and a major overhaul of the Galeries Lafayette department store in Paris. Moreover this March, Levete was awarded the prestigious Jane Drew Prize, an annual lifetime achievement award for an architect who has furthered the progress of women in the industry. PIN–UP caught up with the youthful 60-something in her London office, where a bevy of 50 or so young employees buzz about light-footedly in socks (it's a no-shoes office) on a bright-red carpet. Levete herself prefers to go barefoot as we casually settle down in an open-plan meeting area. Arrayed on a coffee table in front of us are high-gloss photos of recent projects, whose genesis, materiality, and political context Levete proceeds to discuss with a charismatic mix of pride and nonchalance — as though we were leafing through some very highbrow architect's holiday snaps.

Felix Burrichter: Last year you opened two significant cultural buildings, as well as a tower in Bangkok. It looks like in the nine years of AL_A you've built more than during your 20 years with Future Systems.

Amanda Levete: I guess we have, actually — in terms of square meters, at least. I hadn't really thought about it like that. It's interesting because for some years AL_A was under the radar because all our projects

were long-haul jobs, and it's taken time for them to come to fruition. The V&A took six years. Lisbon too. If not more.

FB: Already, with Future Systems, you were known for striking metal façade cladding, like the circular aluminum disks you used for Selfridges in Birmingham. Central Embassy also uses aluminum. I'm curious as to why you switched to ceramic tiles for the V&A and MAAT?

AL: For Lisbon we had originally looked into copper for the façade, but as we developed, it we felt it didn't have enough nuance. The light in Lisbon is so southerly, so golden, that you don't need a golden background. It was just visually too loud, too blingy. We'd already started to look at ceramics with the V&A, and because they were very parallel projects, it just made sense. Moreover Portugal, and particularly Lisbon, has a fantastic tradition of ceramic tiles and craftsmanship. We really wanted to find a surface that would capture the changing light and weather so that the building would give different readings at different times of day. And it really does. At sunset, it goes completely gold, like it's clad in copper; at dusk, it almost looks blackish; while at dawn, it goes very, very white. We worked really hard to find a glaze that would create a very soft backdrop but that was also three-dimensional so that the light bounces off it in different ways.

FB: London's weather is very different from Lisbon's. How are those outdoor porcelain tiles holding up at the V&A?

AL: Very well. Porcelain is one of the hardest materials, you know. And it's completely vitreous so it doesn't absorb any water, which means there's no issue with frost damage. Even though it's a similar material to Lisbon, the challenge at the V&A was to create a very light surface because it literally reflects onto the dark-brick Victorian and Edwardian elevations.

FB: How has the public reacted to the V&A?

AL: Visitor numbers have doubled. More than 50 percent of visitors now use this new entrance. It's a much more informal way to enter. In fact, you don't have to go into the museum at all — you can just hang out in the courtyard, which has a café, and that makes it feel very comfortable. The V&A is quite a complex building, with many different wings constructed over different periods. So when you're in the courtyard, you can see right through to the John Madejski Garden, you can see into some of the Asian galleries, and you can see down into the void of the new gallery space. So you kind of have a sense of the building. And I think that's really important when you go below ground, which can be a very disorienting experience.

FB: Was the V&A like a little payback for not winning the Louvre competition in 2010?

AL: [Laughs.] Our thinking for the Louvre definitely informed the V&A project.

"I don't enjoy shopping. In fact, I loathe it. I go to the same shop usually. So I end up always looking the same."

FB: How so?

AL: Because the brief for the Louvre was to try to improve the visitor experience of entering through the pyramid. I.M. Pei's pyramid was designed for far fewer people than use it now, and it's become a very uncomfortable experience. You lose your sense of orientation, it feels like you're entering a kind of station or airport terminal, and the acoustics are very bad. We felt the solution to the problem of entry didn't lie in the pyramid, because that's a rather beautiful intervention. The problem is *how* you enter. So we proposed a radical backwards step by entering through the courtyard of the Louvre at four of the original palace entrances. By splitting the visitor numbers between three or four entrances, you liberate the pyramid and it just becomes this wonderful place of respite. The Louvre is one of the biggest museums in the world — you need somewhere just to pause and reflect. Anyway, the proposal lost us the competition but it unlocked something in our thinking.

FB: I would love to hear your opinion on the increased "retailification" of museums, or

of the built environment in general.

AL: In the cultural sphere it's something we've considered a lot, particularly with the V&A. When you look at the V&A's main entrance on Cromwell Road, you enter through this wonderful, grand space, but to get to the museum you have to walk through the shop. And while I totally understand the imperative of the revenue the shop generates, I take a more purist position. So for the new entrance we made sure to have two staircases to access the gallery: one to go down and one to come back up. That way you exit through the shop, but at least you don't enter through it.
It's also important that the museum shop is a reflection of the values and the ethos of the museum. The shop at MoMA is really good — it embodies those shared values and you feel that you're taking a piece of MoMA away with you. Whereas some museum shops are full of trinkets that have nothing to do with the institution's collection or ethos. But generally speaking, whether it's a shop, a café, or a restaurant, you have to find a way of integrating it into the museum. It's part of contemporary life, it's where people meet or socialize, it's a place of rendezvous. That's why the courtyard at the V&A is as important as the gallery space and the new entrance, and why at MAAT, we created more public outdoor space than we did gallery space.

FB: Do you go shopping?

AL: Do I go shopping?

FB: Yes. Do you like to shop?

AL: Oh. No. I actually don't enjoy it. In fact, I loathe it. I go to the same shop usually. So I end up always looking the same. [Laughs.]

FB: I'm asking because you're the author of two iconic retail references: Comme des Garçons in New York and Selfridges in Birmingham. And you're currently working on a very large-scale renovation of Galeries Lafayette in Paris. How does your dislike for shopping factor into that?

"Having a gender balance in the office makes a huge difference. We've got very close to 50/50 now. It certainly makes for a much better, happier work environment."

AL: [Laughs.] It doesn't really. At Galeries Lafayette, for example, the big move is not about retail, it's an urban move — it's about relating the department store back to the city. Part of the brief was to restate what it means to be French, because the store is hugely successful internationally but they've lost the loyalty of their French customers. How can you bring that back? So we looked at it in a very similar way to the way we approached the V&A, which is to see it not just as a department store and a retail project, but as an urban project. I think that they see themselves more as a kind of theater in the city, belonging to the city, and being a very important part of the collective, national consciousness of what it is to be Parisian.

FB: So how do you make something like that architecturally tangible?

AL: If you look at their shop windows right now, you have a series of very conventional Haussmann-style façades with windows between columns that close off the street from the interior of the store. So one of our ideas is to open up the façade both literally and metaphorically at street level. We're creating a double-height vitrine, so from the pavement, you'll see down into the lower level and through into the store. The windows become more of a permeable zone between the street and the store, and will be used for scenographic interventions by Galeries Lafayette, with mechanics that allow you to have very dramatic, moving installations, like the very popular Christmas windows. But the windows

Included in the Victoria & Albert Museum (V&A) brief was the addition of over 10,000 square feet of new exhibition space, the largest extension to the museum in 100 years. Amanda Levete responded by creating a column-free, subterranean volume that now houses the V&A's temporary exhibitions. The Sainsbury Gallery, as it is known, is accessed by two interlocking wooden staircases (pictured in the model), one down which you enter, the other up which you exit, through the gift shop.

won't be just about showcasing brands, they will be about showcasing things that speak of the values of Galeries Lafayette. So, for example, on the lower ground floor, at the perimeter — which is what you also see from the street — there will be books, maybe food, and other things that speak to Parisians. Émile Zola wrote a famous novel about a fictional department store, *The Ladies' Paradise* [*Au Bonheur des dames*, 1883], in which he talked about its important role as a social leveler. The shopper has to feel respected and welcomed — it's not just about money. There are things that you're going to discover that will make you smile — even if it's just the pleasure you get from looking and not buying, and that magic of seeing a different world. And in a sense, I think that's a kind of anti-consumerist position and they've been incredibly brave in allowing us to do this.

FB: You've done major commissions in the U.K., received several national awards, including the OBE…

AL: Actually I've just been awarded the CBE. It's one up. There's MBE, OBE, then CBE.

FB: Oh, CBE. So you're the top?

"It's frustrating that the government has no real understanding of the soft cultural power of architecture. They just don't get it."

AL: Then there's dame.

FB: Oh, you're not yet a dame.

AL: [Laughs.] I'm not yet a dame.

FB: Fair enough. But what I am getting at is the role, and the responsibility of the architect in the cultural conversation. 2011, the year you won the V&A commission, seems already like an eternity ago. Now we're looking at Brexit, we're looking at Grenfell Tower, the dismissive remarks about architects by politicians like Michael Gove. What would you say is the state of architecture right now in the U.K.?

AL: I think that the government has no real understanding of the soft cultural power of architecture. They just don't get it. What I find frustrating is that everything has to be measurable. The only way you can make an argument to politicians is through measurable, quantifiable data that usually has to do with money. And that is to miss the point of the value that architecture has to communities, particularly when you're talking about public space. The meeting place for a community should not be about money — it's about something much more important, much more significant, much deeper than that. So I do get frustrated that you have to give data. There should be another way to measure value which isn't data-driven. As an architect, you have a sense of social responsibility and of giving back in any way you can. And of contributing to the debate — whether through your work, through writing, through lecturing, through talking in schools... — I very much feel that sense of responsibility. I also get frustrated that we've never been invited to do social-housing projects, for example.

FB: You've never done any housing?

AL: No, never… Oh, actually we did one housing project in Copenhagen with Future Systems, which was rather nice [the Metropolis building, 2007]. But that's the only housing project we were asked to do. Housing is such a big issue and I'd love to tackle it. It's hard. Really hard.

FB: Why is it so hard?

AL: There is money out there for sure. Maybe we should be more entrepreneurial and we should create the project ourselves. Find the funding and just do it. That's something I'd really like to focus on next year.

FB: Is that something architects can do?

AL: Anyone can do it. I think it's important to not always be reactive but to try and help initiate projects, bring people from different disciplines together. Whether it's people who are funding, or people from different artistic or other disciplines, but to try and make things happen. Because the rulebook

Photography by Mathilde Agius for PIN–UP.


ASOS

has been thrown open now. There are no rules in politics. Look at what's happening to America. Look at what's happening with Brexit. We're in uncharted territory.

FB: Talking of uncharted territory, how do you feel about #metoo and architecture?

AL: I can only talk about myself. Luckily I've personally never experienced that kind of misconduct and it certainly doesn't happen in my office. But having a gender balance also makes a huge difference. We've got very close to 50/50 now. It certainly makes for a much better, happier work environment.

FB: What do you look for when you hire people?

AL: I look for commitment, passion, talent, and the ability to communicate. We work very hard on creating a culture in the office that's also to do with people taking on huge responsibility and having a very management-light approach. Because I really do believe that the less structure there is, the more the office will look after itself. I've learned that through experience. And when we've tried to hire experience and graft that into the office, it's really hard, whereas when people have grown up here, that's when it really works.

FB: So a lot of people have been here now for ten years or even longer?

AL: Yeah. And that's very gratifying.

FB: I really love the fact that you make everyone take off their shoes in your office. It's a very small detail but it has a huge impact.

AL: It has a massive impact. You take off your shoes and it's like you're shedding a layer.

FB: So you even ask clients who come in for presentations?

AL: Yeah, they are "highly encouraged" to take their shoes off.

FB: And when you show them presentations, you do it on the same glossy photo paper that we're looking at now? Is there a deeper significance to using it?

AL: As opposed to?

FB: I don't know. Maybe an iPad?

AL: I'm never particularly keen on doing iPad presentations. When you exchange a piece of paper between two people, you look at each other and you have a different conversation because you can kind of go back to that [flipping papers], whereas on the iPad, it's more static.

FB: Would you say that your architectural language has changed since you've been working on your own — or rather since you've no longer been working with Jan as Future Systems?

AL: Yes. In a way I really underestimated the difficulty of transitioning from Future Systems

Photography by Mathilde Agius for PIN–UP.

A lateral view of the model for Portugal's Museum of Art, Architecture, and Technology (MAAT). Designed by Amanda Levete in 2010 and completed in 2017, the wave-like structure on the banks of Lisbon's River Tagus houses temporary exhibitions and has become one of the country's most visited contemporary-art institutions. The ceramic tiles on the south-facing, cantilevered façade reflect both the sunlight and the sound of lapping waves.

to AL_A. I thought, "Well, I've got my team, it's going to be fine, we'll just carry on, business as normal." But it's much more complex than that. And as a practice, it took us time to understand who we were becoming.

FB: So first there was the "us" of you and Jan as equal partners. Then there was "us" as in you, alone, with your team. That's a very different "us."

"The rulebook has been thrown open. There are no rules in politics. Look at what's happening to America. Look at what's happening with Brexit. We're in uncharted territory."

AL: A very different us. But I was also interested in a much more collaborative way of working. For Jan, the project always started with a master sketch and, ultimately, that's where we started to diverge professionally. To put it very crudely, at Future Systems, the work started with a sketch, while at AL_A, it starts with a conversation. There's a conversation between me and my three directors, and what drives our thinking is a sense of finding a narrative and a language that will help us root the building in its place and make it an extension of the urban grain of the city. And that's why, for me, looking at projects like MAAT, the V&A, or Galeries Lafayette, I see them not just as cultural or retail projects, but as urban projects. How can each one contribute to a sense of citizenship and belonging, and how can it become part of the city conversation, not just part of the iconography of the city? There is a real interest in the heritage and history of the place.

FB: For me, although they share a similar formal language, projects by AL_A and Future Systems differ in that the former are conversations while the latter are statements.

AL: Definitely. That's quite a nice way to put it.

FB: Is that just your personal evolution or do you think that's also an evolution in architecture in general?

AL: I think it's an evolution in architecture that is just beginning. And I think that if you look at museums globally, in the past couple of years, they have been hugely expansionist in their mission — if you think about the Guggenheim or the Tate. And I think there's a new humility now. Sometimes it's more important to make what you've got work harder and better and connect more to the city, to the citizen, to the landscape, rather than to make a very bold statement. Now I'm not saying there isn't room for a building to do that, because of course there still is. I see history as a resistance you need in order to go beyond where you might have imagined you could go. You have to both revere and protect but sometimes take away in order to start a new conversation, which is what we did at the V&A. So it's ironic that even in its name, Future Systems already took a very different position, in opposition to history.

FB: Future Systems almost implies there're just systems, no personalities…

AL: Which is funny because that is why Jan called it Future Systems — it wasn't supposed to be about a name — and yet it was all about Jan. [Laughs.] So when Jan and I had agreed to split the office, it was absolutely right that he should carry on with the name Future Systems. When he died, a lot of people said I should continue with the name because it's a brand. The idea of the office as a brand! [Rolls her eyes.] And I just felt very, very strongly that with Jan's death Future Systems died too and that I had to make my own way. Another abstract name would have been so confusing, so I thought, "Let's just call it by my name."