FOLLY
2014

a project in partnership with
The Architectural League
of New York
FOLLY 2014: SuralArk

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Socrates Publishing 2014
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FOLLY 2014
“Folly” is a design/build competition co-sponsored by The Architectural League and Socrates Sculpture Park, which invites emerging architects and designers to propose contemporary interpretations of the architectural folly, traditionally a fanciful, small-scale building or pavilion sited in a garden or landscape to frame a view or serve as a conversation piece.

This year’s “Folly” winner is Austin + Mergold. As winners, they received a grant and a two-month residency in Socrates Sculpture Park’s outdoor studio, in addition to the opportunity to build their project to scale for exhibition in the Park.

“Folly” was established in 2011 by Socrates, in partnership with the League, to explore the intersections between architecture and sculpture and the increasing overlaps in references, materials, and building techniques between the two disciplines.
SuralArk by Jason Austin and Aleksandr Mergold, of the Philadelphia-based architectural firm Austin + Mergold, is the conceptually rich and visually arresting winning proposal for Folly 2014.

SuralArk is an inverted, seemingly unfinished (or perhaps decomposing) boat hull rising from the ground to provide a canopy and a place for reflection. Explicitly referencing Noah’s Ark and its arrival at Mount Ararat, the form suggests, in the designers’ words, “an imposing, fanciful, yet purposeless structure: a boat without water, a house without inhabitants, a simple hulking mass of a conflicted typology.” As an “American vernacular interpretation of the original,” SuralArk is constructed with dimensional lumber and clad in a patchwork of vinyl siding. The ambiguity and formal tension of the piece is captured in the project statement by Austin + Mergold, in which they reflect, “Whether this
was once a house in Levittown now on its way to becoming a boat, or a new hybrid houseboat under construction on the shore of East River in anticipation of the next hurricane flood is not entirely clear.”

Proclaiming that the old territorial designations of rural, suburban, and urban are increasingly blurred and no longer applicable, Austin + Mergold invented the classifications “Sural” and “Rurban” to describe the surreal, liminal, and hybrid condition articulated by their proposal. Architectural League Program Director Anne Rieselbach notes: “the project exemplifies this new vocabulary, providing an arresting threshold to Socrates, while offering multiple readings of the park’s own hybrid context.”

“SuralArk deftly sails between a number of dichotomies,” Folly 2014 juror Chris Doyle notes. “Both as an object and as a space, the project has a clever elegance.” Doyle
also praises the conceptual and contextual strengths of the piece: “the designers refer to the river and the recent flooding [of Socrates Sculpture Park], while at the same time
securely settling the work among the vinyl-clad houses of Queens.”

“With SuralArk, Austin + Mergold have captured “the essence of Socrates,” says Socrates Sculpture Park’s Executive Director, John Hatfield. “As visitors explore its overturned hull at the waterfront, they will be reminded of the park’s industrial heritage and that New York City, with its functional waterways, is indeed a city of water.”
Interview

JASON
AUSTIN
+
ALEKSANDR MERGOLD

BY
ELISSA
GOLDSTONE

FOLLY 2014
Elissa Goldstone: How did Austin + Mergold start?

Jason Austin: Unofficially, our partnership started when we were undergraduate classmates in Cornell’s architecture school in 1995. After graduation and stints working at offices in New York, we attended graduate school—Aleks received his Masters of Architecture from Princeton University while I received my Masters of Landscape Architecture from the University of Pennsylvania. We continued to collaborate on competitions and exhibitions while working in different offices in different cities, then officially started our practice in 2007 after receiving a design commission for an affordable housing development in Central Pennsylvania.

Aleksandr Mergold: We also come from very
different geographical areas and from very different modes of living. Jason grew up in Central Pennsylvania, which at the time was basically rural. I am from Tashkent, Uzbekistan, an area that has been urban, supposedly, for at least 2,000 years. So in a way, we are from the two ends of the spectrum of human habitation—rural and urban. Which in hindsight, I think has very much shaped our work.

**Goldstone: Do you maintain individual practices, or do you always work collaboratively as a studio?**

**Austin:** We physically work in two different spaces but collectively collaborate as a single studio with shared resources and staff—Aleks is in Ithaca, while I am in Philadelphia. Mobile applications and cloud storage provide us flexibility and, we think, improve our efficiency. We doodle and sketch a lot and circulate these
drawings to one another. Maintaining two offices also allows us to widen the catchment area of our work and its diversity.

Goldstone: Your installation at Socrates Sculpture Park, SuralArk, is a continuation of your investigation of hybrid American regions. You’ve created trademarked classifications for these composite landscapes, such as “Sural” and “Rurban.” Tell me about these concepts.
Mergold: Traditionally, the vast majority of non-urban building in the U.S. happens without architects and without a clear continuation of a vernacular tradition; and this territory has remained outside of any architectural discourse. The attributes and amenities of urbanity are spreading further into suburbs, and rural living finds its way into cities. We wonder what shapes this architecture. The clarity of traversing a city, suburb, and countryside is now being replaced by a gradient—a hybrid condition of all three territorial designations. This resultant—the in-between, which manifests itself in multiple scales, media, and cultural experiences—is a bizarre, almost surreal, liminal condition sculpted by both local and global metrics. Since the classic designations—rural, suburban, urban—no longer apply here, we call for a new classification: Sural and Rurban as the extreme ends of the same gradient range.
We found ourselves working on our first big project, in Central Pennsylvania, and realized that in dealing with these classifications we were in a “brave (not so) new world.” Then we rediscovered for ourselves Andrea Palladio, the author of *The Four Books of Architecture*, who had written about architecture driven by agrarian production, among other things. There hasn’t been a serious investigation of these blurred settlement transitions and borrowed
classifications and their impact on architectural form and contemporary vernacular construction methods for a considerable amount of time. To us, Palladio was the first Sural architect, and that was 500 years ago. Now, we hear Rem is interested in the rural.

**Goldstone:** Wow, nice to beat Koolhaas to the punch. Perhaps he will have rural be a central focus of this year’s Venice Biennale?

**Mergold:** This year’s Biennale theme is Fundamental. We proposed to include a Sural/Rurban project as part of the US pavilion since it would very much fit with the ethos of the exhibit proposed by Rem. We have been invited to participate in the Biennale as an “OfficeUS Outpost.” So perhaps there will be some Sural/Rurban in Venice after all. We’ll keep you posted.
Goldstone: Congratulations! Tell me about some of your favorite past projects and how they relate to SuralArk.

**Austin:** Our past projects are quite diverse. They range from private residence renovations to vineyard maps to master plans for a mini-golf course to speculative grain silo starter homes. We don’t really pick favorites—it’s more about how much we’ve learned along the way from working with a project’s site conditions, economic constraints, materials, etc. We find the projects of greatest discovery—those that challenge the limits of materiality or making methods—to be the most interesting.

One of those was the 4BKS of Archiculture, a traveling exhibit that commemorated the 500th birthday of Palladio. The installation showcased the work of our practice with similar techniques to those that Palladio utilized. It was comprised of a series
of wood blocks constructed from conventional plywood, but we used laser-engraved etching in lieu of hand carving for the encryption of information within the wood block. That’s how we discovered Palladio.

**Mergold:** *House-In-A-Can* is an ongoing research project that looks to the traditional building forms of the rural, agrarian landscape and proposes the re-appropriation of vacated metal grain bins for affordable housing. While we are currently working on the design/development of the built prototype, house plans and construction drawings from the project are also available on Hometta.com, a clearinghouse for modern house plans.

*Sural Wall I* and *Sural Wall II*, the predecessors to *SuralArk*, were two separate art installations in which we were testing the metrics of the most ubiquitous material in suburbia—vinyl siding—which was combined
with a structural frame manufactured from contemporary CNC milling techniques. *Sural Wall I* demonstrated the capacity of vinyl siding to transmit light when backlit; *Sural Wall II* utilized the maximum flexibility or formal curvature of vinyl siding. We saw a real beauty in these mundane and, to us, ugly things.

**Goldstone:** The mundane can be beautiful and valuable; *SuralArk* certainly pushes us to see that. Given your interest in describing landscapes, how would you classify the part of Queens around Socrates Sculpture Park?

**Austin:** That area is a great example of moments of both hybrid conditions. When you experience this part of Queens, especially walking down Broadway and the parallel streets in between the subway and the park, the urban density and social activity that spills
onto the street clearly suggests that this is an urban condition. It’s not much different in terms of scale or density to many places within Philadelphia. However, relative to Manhattan and based on building typologies, one could argue that this is truly a suburban condition. And this suburban reading of Queens is further supported by the landmark diner along
Broadway, the Costco adjacent to Socrates, and the material palette of suburbia—hence the inclusion of vinyl siding in *SuralArk*. But within the park and along the shore of the East River, the rustic, seemingly untamed nature of the waterfront provides a buffer between the urban/suburban scape of Queens to the east, setting the stage for a moment of rurality adjacent to the Manhattan skyline beyond. As your eye moves north and east of Socrates’ waterfront, you notice relics of the post-industrial landscape colliding with new high-rises seen above the three-story horizon of Queens—all foregrounded by Socrates Sculpture Park. Seems pretty Sural/Rurban to us!

**Goldstone:** The waterfront is a unique element of the Socrates landscape, and obviously the nautical ark in *SuralArk* relates to the site’s proximity
to a waterway. Is that another hybrid condition—architecture for both land and sea? There is a certainly some irony of an upturned ark at Socrates, in a lieu of the recent flooding from Superstorm Sandy.

**Mergold:** Supposedly, the typical wood framing used in most single-family houses in the United States has roots in shipbuilding. We were told by an old professor of ours in undergrad that whaling ships would stop for repairs along the east coast of the U.S., and the captain would ask the shipwright to build a cabin. Flipping that upside-down was the most efficient way to frame a watertight vessel. And if you go to the early basilicas around Italy, they more or less look like overturned ships, and the names of building parts are related to boats—nave, for example. So there is a symbiotic relationship that one cannot escape.
Goldstone: Are there other architects, designers, or cultural producers that you feel are making work around or about similar concepts?

**Austin and Mergold:** Andrea Palladio, DROOG, Alejandro Aravena / Elemental, Alexander Brodsky.

Goldstone: Do you see the Sural/Rurban concept, as you define it, as a movement or a style?

**Austin:** Neither. For us, it’s simply dealing with a reality that for various reasons has been largely ignored. It’s a re-consideration of settlement patterns, urbanization classifications, and a re-examination of the contemporary American vernacular traditions. There has been a resurgence of interest in supporting the vernacular tradition of place as
the rapid exchange and sharing of information, ideas, and culture at the global scale has led to a deterioration of local identity over the last several decades.

**Mergold:** For our generation and for many Americans and citizens of the world, that tradition of place has been rooted in an architecture of mass production and homogeneity—driven by economics, not aesthetics. We are working on a project for a biennale in Slovenia that deals with similar issues. So perhaps our work should be understood as a commentary to these physical and phenomenal forces at play within the American landscape, not as a movement or style.

**Goldstone:** What appealed to you about the Folly project?
**Mergold:** Follies, by definition, are somewhere between sculpture and architecture, so that meant there was a bit more latitude for experimentation. That was very important for the Sural idea and for working with some abnormal (but also very normal) materials.

**Austin:** And the opportunity to construct at 1:1 scale is invaluable to the education of an architect. The act of making is learning, and
in the act of construction, we gain a deeper appreciation for the work and choreography that is carried out on the construction site.

Goldstone: I think you’re touching on something that is incredibly interesting about architecture, as opposed to the fine arts. The partial project or proposal stage for an architectural project is so robust that it can satisfy as its own product. It is interesting that you mention the benefits of constructing at full scale as educational for an architect, as if realizing a physical work is more experimental than exhibiting the partial or imagined idea.

When we initiated Folly with The Architectural League in 2011, we did so to explore the relationship between sculpture and architecture. On Socrates’ end, we were receiving an increasing number of project proposals from architects and
designers for non-programmed structures, while simultaneously artists were proposing more and more architectural works—pavilions, riffs on A-frame houses, bridges, etc. There was a blurring of lines and delineating of disciplines. Over the years, the roles seem to be merging even further. Artists are increasingly aware of the value of the unrealized, again taking cues from the architectural community. I am thinking of projects like *The Agency of Unrealized Projects* by Hans Ulrich Obrist, which aims to record, highlight, exhibit, and maybe even elevate unfinished or unrealized artists’ projects, which historically disappear with the artist and rarely have art historical or critical relevance.

So I’m curious, what are the differences between the *SuralArk* proposal and the *SuralArk* at Socrates right now?
Mergold: There were a few adjustments that we decided to make in the field based on the material, scale, and aesthetics. That’s exciting, because you can’t really do that to a building under construction, especially when there’s a client involved. In that sense, it is a sculpture, and we are very happy for it. But all in all, it is remarkably close to the proposal, which is both a miracle and a puzzle. We sometimes think about an interview with Aldo Rossi in Domus from the 1980s, in which he said, “in a scary way, some of my sketches are equal to the final result.” We always wondered what he meant and why he found it scary. That seems clearer now—what seems like an innocent sketch is a very powerful and potent force even before it becomes a reality.

Goldstone: Be careful of what you render, it may exist one day. Did the Folly program and the realization of SuralArk alter or
advance any previous ideas that you had about your own studio and works?

Mergold: We always liked the idea of making and thinking through making. It may seem somehow counterintuitive, but this way of establishing a relationship with material, site, light, horizon, gravity—the fundamentals of architecture—seems particularly productive to us. We do not really have a preconceived notion of what ought to be there; we tend to tease it out. The SuralArk was very much “teased out” of its surroundings and context and then informed by our preoccupation with the mundane American vernacular.

Goldstone: Moving beyond SuralArk, what’s next?

Mergold: Gather our thoughts; finish projects that we had to put on hold while constructing
the Ark; have a drink with our fantastic helper crew. We have been harboring the idea of a book—a Sural Atlas. But a book, like a building or sculpture, takes a lot of time and work. So we might be jumping into another one of these ordeals.

Goldstone: Logical next steps, for sure. A book is a tremendous amount of work, and it can have a really meaningful and extensive presence. Finally, let me say that SuralArk is a fantastic building/sculpture. The vinyl surface creates exquisite lighting effects, and its massive scale is extremely impressive at the entrance to the Park. Socrates and The Architectural League are so thrilled to see it brought to life. Thank you for all of the creative and physical energy that brought SuralArk into existence and for sharing it with the public.
SuralArk was selected from over 170 submissions by a jury of esteemed architects, artists, and arts professionals, including:

Chris Doyle, artist
chrisdoylestudio.com

John Hatfield, Socrates Sculpture Park
socratessculpturepark.org

Enrique Norten, TEN Arquitectos
ten-arquitectos.com

Lisa Switkin, James Corner Field Operations
fieldoperations.net

Ada Tolla, LOT-EK
lot-ek.com
NOTABLE ENTRIES
The following ten submissions were recognized by the Folly jury as intriguing examples of design strategies. Each proposal responded ingeniously to this year’s site and its proximity to the main entrance of Socrates Sculpture Park. As in past years, several themes became apparent as the jury reviewed the submissions.

Two proposals stood out as thoughtful examinations of entry spaces and portals. Both teams sought to draw visitors into the park and presented schemes that created frames through which to view the adjacent works of art. Concerned with the passive process of entering Socrates, Woojae Sung and Kyuseon Hong created Vestibule + as a celebration of the park’s active interior. The team imagined a vortex of tension cables and polyethylene tape that would hold a galvanized steel cube in stasis, creating a defined transitional space between the park and its neighborhood. Designed
Top: Vestibule +, Woojae Sung and Kyuseon Hong
Bottom: Living SSP Room, Margarita Calero, María Carrascal, and Alberto Manrique
specifically to allure, Vestibule + was intended to “fascinate the people passing by and absorb them into the park as active agents.”

Margarita Calero, María Carrascal, and Alberto Manrique’s Living SSP Room, on the other hand, distorted the idea of a traditional living room by proposing a framed chamber enclosed on two sides by mirrored walls. Their proposal invited the residents of Queens to use Living SSP Room as their own, in homage to, as they described it, Socrates’ role as “a special courtyard of neighboring communities.”

The most dominant theme of the collective entries related to surface cladding. A number of proposals employed reflective surfaces, which in turn prompted a discussion among the jurors about the conceptual border between interior and exterior space. Similar to Living SSP Room, Seung Teak Lee and Mi Jung Lim’s Invisible
*Barn* deformed a conventional domestic building typology and “re-contextualizes the landscape of the Socrates Sculpture Park by projecting the landscape on the structural proposition.” A compressed parallelogram made of wood studs wrapped in mirrored Mylar film, *Invisible Barn* offers a purely reflective image that was, according to juror Chris Doyle, “fully integrated into the site in a captivating way…one of the best examples of a strong, evocative, but clearly achievable project.”

Composed of three torqued reflective and refractive surfaces, Mahdi Alibakhshian, Samuel Ray Jacobson, and Reza Zia’s *Molly* was a striking conceptual piece that added to the dialogue about what makes a successful reflective form. The three planes rest in tactical stability and “fold the landscape of park and city into one point.”
Top: *Invisible Barn*, Seung Teak Lee and Mi Jung Lim
Bottom: *Molly*, Mahdi Alibakhshian, Samuel Ray Jacobson, and Reza Zia
In true keeping with the idea of a purposeless structure, three teams transcended the boundary between sculpture and architecture through their imaginative and whimsical proposals. Jack Morley’s *Thing 1, Thing 2* was a molecular-like structure that would evolve over a 12-month period in a series of distinct inflatable follies. As a complex form that could be seen miles away, Morley’s proposal was recognized by the jury as a stunning and unique potential addition to Socrates’ landscape.

Alfie Koetter and Emmett Zeifman’s *Grotto* was one of a few proposals that introduced a self-supporting canopy. The duo proposed a folly composed of a suspended net of mesh stalactites each filled with scrap foam, with the goal of “conflating the natural and the artificial, the real and the sham, and destabilizing one’s evaluation of authenticity.” Gregory Serweta’s *Pillow Fort*, on the other hand, made no claims
Top: *Thing 1, Thing 2*, Jack Morley
Bottom: *Grotto*, Alfie Koetter and Emmett Zeifman
to be anything more complex than what it was—a giant, inhabitable Tyvek pillow. Serweta simply sought to “capture and carry that almost humanly universal warm fuzzy feeling: the whim and impermanence of childhood,” and in turn delighted the jury with his proposal’s bold scale and inherent humor.

This year’s winning proposal is dually static and active. Jason Austin and Aleksandr Mergold’s SuralArk adopts the form of an overturned ship, deftly capturing the energy of a vessel that was once designed to travel and is now immobilized. Similarly, though designed to be a static piece, Jacob Esocoff’s Saturation implied motion with measured chromatic sequencing. His proposal explains that visitors are meant to follow a prescribed loop that opens to a large courtyard and that, like a heat map, “color is used to heighten the user’s awareness
Top: Pillow Fort, Gregory Serwetay
Bottom: Saturation, Jacob Esocoff
of their movement around and through the space of the folly.” Where as *Saturation* only suggested motion, Bogdan Chipara’s *Balancing Path* proposed “controlled instability” in the form of a grounded see-saw hull. Chipara designed *Balancing Path* to be constructed from twisted bamboo stalks, allowing visitors to interact with the installation and control their experience of moving through the park.

**Guilhem Lamour’s** *A Bridge in a Tree* was the only proposal to physically transcend the boundary between Socrates and its surrounding neighborhood. Lamour’s wish was for his bridge to “engage with the visitor and be part of [Vernon] Boulevard.” Certainly it might have encouraged visitors to take their experiences from the park with them as they exited.
Top: *Balancing Path*, Bogdan Chipara
Bottom: *A Bridge in a Tree*, Guilhem Lamour
Proposal Images of SuralArk, Jason Austin + Aleksandr Mergold
ABOUT
The Architectural League

The Architectural League of New York nurtures excellence in architecture, design, and urbanism, and stimulates thinking and debate about the critical design and building issues of our time. As a vital, independent forum for architecture and its allied disciplines, the League helps create a more beautiful, vibrant, innovative, and sustainable future.

archleague.org
Socrates Sculpture Park

For over 28 years, Socrates Sculpture Park has been a model of public art production, community activism, and socially inspired place-making. Known for fostering experimental and visionary artworks, the park has exhibited over 1,000 artists on its five waterfront acres, providing resources to create large-scale art works on-site.

Open 365 days a year, the park also offers art-making workshops for children, teens, and adults, event-based programming, and an outdoor international film series — all free and open to the public.

The park’s existence is based on the belief that reclamation, revitalization, and creative expression are vital to the survival, humanity, and improvement of our urban environment.

socratessculpturepark.org
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   Assistance provided by Jessica Liss and Melissa Russell, The Architectural League.

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“Notable Entries” by Melissa Russell.

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Nathan Dorr
Socrates Sculpture Park
Folly 2014 applicants

SuralArk will be on view at Socrates Sculpture Park until August 3rd, 2014.