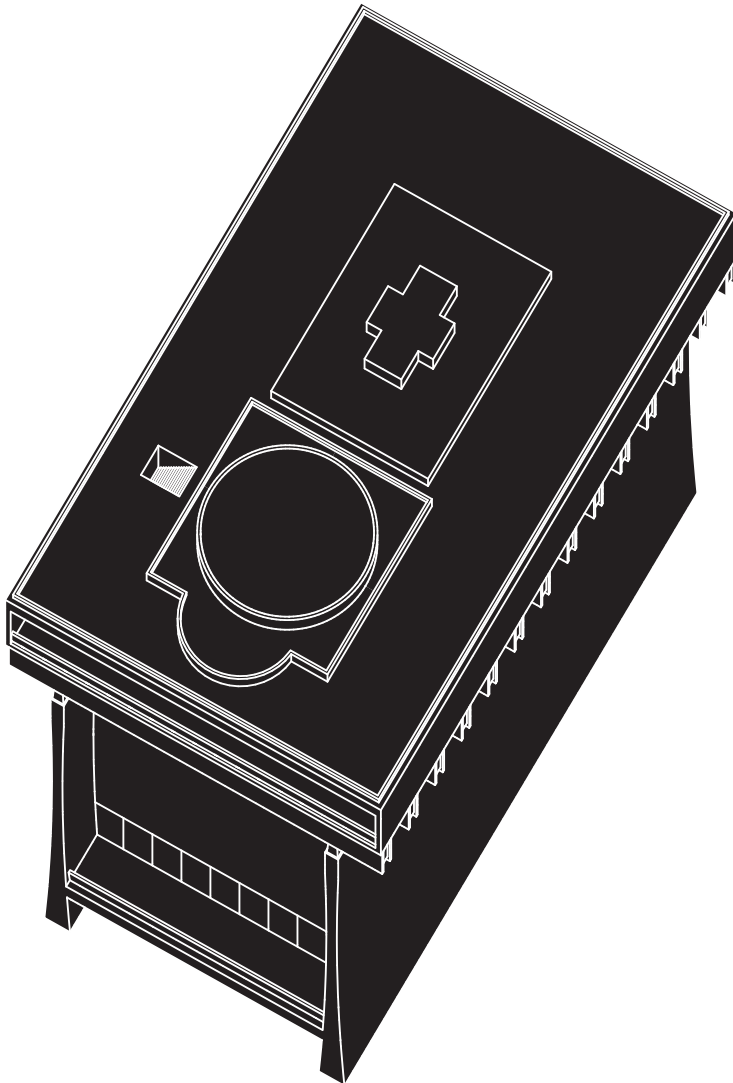


# OH, YES, MR PRESIDENT!

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1  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LLL72t\\_bHVo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LLL72t_bHVo)  
(last accessed 25 November 2015).

2  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9XHdmMKuac4>  
(last accessed 25 November 2015).

Pairing two seemingly unrelated YouTube videos – *Ordos 100* (1:00:38)<sup>1</sup> and *Telephone Conversation between President Johnson and Gordon Bunshaft, 10/10/1968* (7:49)<sup>2</sup> – would be largely nonsensical, were it not for both videos’ unabashed demonstration of how architecture is regularly coerced. Both recordings brilliantly substantiate architecture’s lack of a sense of urgency by focusing on its most commodified and perverted feature: the relationship between “the” client and “his” designer. The videos are both potboiler charades about submissiveness (on the part of the architect?) and a crude blindness to spatial criticality and social impact (on the part of the client?).

### The Oval Room

In 1968, Gordon Bunshaft, Chief Designer at SOM, was working on the Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library in Austin, Texas. Since Franklin D. Roosevelt, American presidents have been entitled to being commemorated by means of an iconic, purpose-built archival library/museum erected by the National Archives and Records Administration. The choice of architect for such projects, however, has usually been the result of a protocol-driven exercise rather than the conscious and informed involvement of the presidential dedicatee. A recently disclosed telephone conversation between Lyndon Johnson and Bunshaft bears witness to the results of the unavoidably ham-fisted results of political intervention in architectural design.

By the time Johnson made this phone call on 10 October 1968, Bunshaft had already designed the ultimate pharaonic library, entirely clad in his favourite travertine marble, as if he himself were the client. The design was tall, a pitch-perfect merging of space and programme down to the very last inch. Johnson was calling Bunshaft because he had been unsuccessful in the attempt to convince some of SOM’s project architects to insert a replica of the Oval Office into the plan. With construction work well advanced, Johnson’s plea for a “facsimile” Oval Office couldn’t have been more poorly timed. In addition, Bunshaft’s rigid plan by no means allowed for such an addition. Here is the transcript of the telephone conversation that transpired between the two men:

“Just a moment . . .” [secretary]

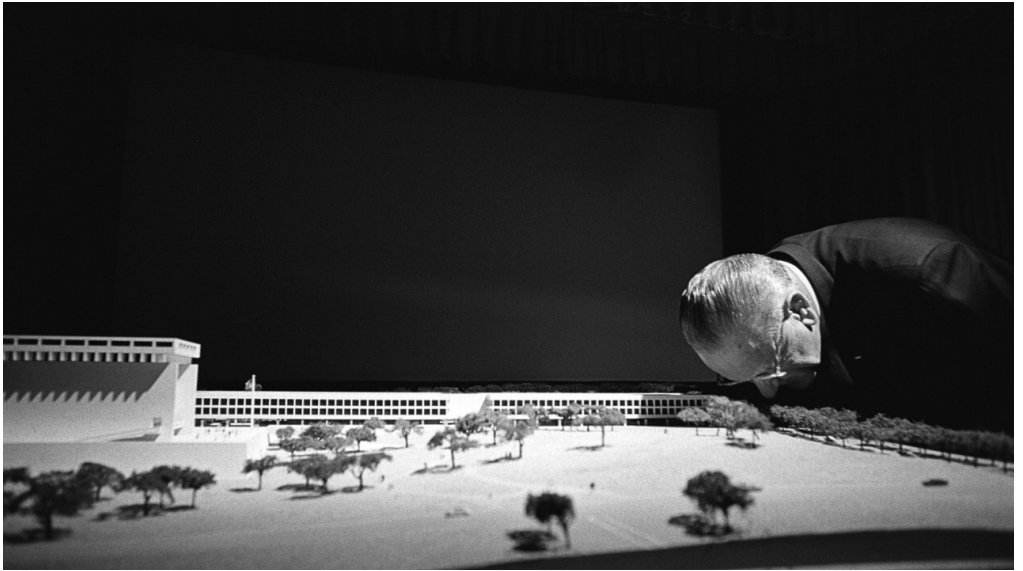
“Hello! . . . Hello!” [President Johnson]

“Mr. Bunshaft on the line. Go ahead, Sir.” [secretary]

“Gordon!”

“Yes.” [Gordon Bunshaft]

“Lyndon Johnson.”



“Oh, yes, Mr President. How are you?”

“I hope I’m not interrupting your dinner or something.”

“Oh, no, no, we finished some time ago.”

“Gordon, we, uh . . . Our folks have been out looking at these libraries, and, uh . . . Is there no way in the world that we could reconstitute as nearly as possible, uh, the president’s office at the library – the president’s office here?”

“Well . . . We hadn’t thought of it, but it . . . it’s, uh . . . It’s possible . . .”

“I’d hate to build me a little one outside there at the side and say this is the way the president’s office looked, and here’s his desk, and here’s his chair, here’s his FDR picture, here’s his . . . where all these people sat. Now, that is the most attractive thing, they tell me, uh . . . to the people who go and hear it, is Truman discussing where he sat in his office . . .”

“Yes, I’ve seen it at Kansas . . . Mr Tru- . . . President Truman . . .”

“Mary Bird said we, well, we’re having trouble, and she said it just ought to be, we just should have thought of it earlier . . . , and now we got a bunch of ‘can’t do’ philosophy. She says that the ceiling is not high enough. Well, maybe we don’t have to have the same height ceiling, but, uh . . . Maybe, uh . . . maybe we can’t have the same oval room; maybe it will have different dimensions. But it seems to me that if we could, we ought to take this rug out of here, and this chair, uh . . . just as the Kennedys are doing and have done, just as the Trumans did, and, uh . . . [We] ought to take the desk, ought to take the chairs, and we ought to say – you see, there are relatively few people that come to the president’s office here, but all of them want

**Lyndon Johnson examines the concept model of the Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library, 12 May 1966**

to see where the president worked just as much as they want to see where the president was born when they come to our little house. That's one of the basic things. And it's going to be remembered, and impress it on 'em a lot more than some book up on a shelf."

"Yes, well . . ."

"And if we could, that's the one thing I want, I'd like to have as near a reproduction as finances and architectural, uh . . . requirements would permit. I don't say it's gotta be 18 feet high, or 14, or it's gotta be 38 feet long . . ."

"Well . . ."

"We might have a little card on the door, and say this is not an exact reproduction, or something, but I'd like for it to be such, well, that they get an impression that here's where the president worked, 'cause they all want to see that. They all wanna . . . That's what they come to see."

"Well, Mr. President, we'll get the dimensions and we'll try several locations, or maybe there's more than one, and it would be nice if we could do it, to do it exactly, because I think the quality of that room is the total thing, and it may be possible to do it. I . . ."

"Well, at Truman, they tell me, they did a rather good job out there."

"Because that's the main thing in the whole place. There isn't much else to see at the Truman Library except that; that's why, sort of, people orient towards it. It's right off the lobby, and as I recall it, it's pretty exact, even to the height. It's a wing off of a low building so they could, you know, reproduce it exactly – in fact, that's the whole feature of the whole Truman Library. So it's easy to do there. And, uh . . . Goodness me, if that's what you'd like, we'll make every effort . . ."

"I'd rather have that than anything else about the building."

"I gather that all right, and we'll see . . ."

"I'm in there now. I'm in that office tonight, and I come in it sometimes at 6:30 in the morning and I am here till late, and I'd like for them to see just where we work, and I would like to have the exact replica as near as possible, but I would accept anything that would be better than a nugget."

"Oh, I think, uh . . . We'll try to make it exact, and incidentally, it is a beautiful room . . . It really is a beautiful room, so we ought to try to see if we can do it by going through a floor or something, that part is . . . It's just a question whether there is room in plan, you know, but we'll see what we can do . . ."

"If you could work on it . . . How are they coming on it?"

"Well, they're pouring away, in fact. The place that might do, it's just about . . . We have to catch it right now, because they will be pouring floors above that pretty soon, but it's not too late right now . . ."

"Well, for God's sake . . ."

"The only problem is if we . . . if we have enough space. The height, I think

it could work, but it's just a question whether we have enough space in plan to reproduce that oval."

"Take some space from somebody else!"

"I don't . . . We'll see what we can do."

"You do it! Thank you. I know you can. When are we going to open it?"

"Well, the latest plans, for opening, is in . . . in June of . . . of '70 . . ."

"Mmmm."

"It could be done earlier than that, the construction, but then you have to put all the exhibits in, and I think the safe date for an official opening would be around June of 1970."

"Mmmm, I thought we were going to make it in January. That's what I heard."

"That was our original plan. The contractor is going along, and let's hope that he might be done in January, February, March . . . But it's gonna take a little time to move in and get all the exhibits arranged."

"Mmmm. Are you generally happy with it?"

"Well, the best thing about this, Mr President, is that the contractor is very good, and he's doing a very good job, and everybody – we're all very happy with the quality of the job so far, and that's, of course, very important."

"And what about our exhibits?"

"Well, Mrs Johnson has been working with Arthur Drexler and I think the whole thing is coming along fine. I think the general design, as far as what I know of it, looks very good to me. If we could get this oval in where I have in mind, your office . . ."

"Mmmm."

"I don't know if we have enough room, but if we can, than everybody would be happy . . ."

"You just get it. Just make it smaller."

"I'm sure we'll get it."

"Thank you!"

### **Intermediate Coda**

The Lyndon Johnson Library opened on 22 May 1971, reproducing a seven-eighths-scale replica of the oval room on the library's eighth floor.

### **Chinese Laughter**

In 2012, Ai Weiwei directed a documentary on a "construction project" curated by Herzog & de Meuron and himself. In early 2008, 100 architects from 27 countries gathered in Ordos, in Inner Mongolia. They had each been chosen to design one of the project's one hundred villas of a thousand square metres each. The overarching ambition

was to construct a new community – or so Ai and Herzog & de Meuron stated at the Ordos 100 launch.

The opening shot of the documentary shows Ai rather boringly playing with foam cubes. Each volume symbolically represents one of the thousand-square-metre “houses”. The names of the architects are printed on the cubes. The underlying allotment plan for the new community bears a striking resemblance to a gated community. The camera pans in, and the demiurge sighs (as if he wants to be elsewhere). Ai looks up, shrugs and says “So?”, as if to express the utter irrelevance of the whole operation with this single word.

In the next frame, we see the architects who have just flown in from all over the world. They smile. Some acknowledge the camera and behave accordingly. At the hotel, Ai explains the motivation of the colloquium to an accomplice:

It is as if you're part of a large movement. This movement is about communicating, exchange ideas, knowledge and many experiences. We're not interested in just producing architecture; we're more interested in human conceptual exchange. The old world is not so interesting, and you see . . . They are so excited, even if they don't design. I think it's still very exciting for them to be here and discuss, because we're talking about a possibility rather than a fixed solid production.<sup>3</sup>

In the room next door, the client is preparing the colloquium's inaugural speech. Cai Jiang, president of the Jiang Yuan Water Engineering Company, practises his welcoming words, but nothing sensible seems to want to come out of his mouth. In the end, he says to the translator: “As long as you translate it correctly, it doesn't matter what I say.”

The architects have gathered in a Cleopatra-style hotel lobby. They are still smiling. “The promise of a new city is so exciting,” one of them proclaims. Further whimsical remarks are made by other architects, seemingly without a shred of social consciousness. The lemmings are ready for their collective suicide. A presentation by the client shows how Ordos 100 is just a needle in a vast real-estate haystack, an operation without any clear architectural ambition. Ordos 100 needs to be understood as decisive proof of the company's sense of architectural responsibility. Not one of the architects indicates any objection to this perspective. Although a hint of bewilderment seems evident in the eyes of some, the majority willingly drink it all in before the team of hired photographers. Jiang Yuan, the CEO of Ordos Jiang Yuan Cultural and

Creative Industry Development, Ltd, expresses satisfaction with this first day. He and his Chinese team laugh.

The next morning, someone finally asks the first critical question; it is a Swiss architect. A brief discussion ensues. Almost everyone else, however, continues to praise the project for its embodiment of “the possibility of a pure architectural exercise”. What ultimately serves as a reality check for the crowd of architects is the contract, a Chinese one according to which none of the architects would stay on to build their design. After they delivered the building-permit drawings, they would be expected to disappear, since the company would take care of things from there. “We have to jump. It’s not about absolute control,” one architect remarks. But none of the others seems to be convinced by his reasoning. The absence of a real client seems to have become an issue after all.

During the site visit, the architects’ feeling of disorientation increases. The generic site presents itself as a completely flat, empty, snow-covered landscape. It seems like the most useless site visit ever. Meanwhile, back at the hotel the company’s clerks are preparing envelopes filled with cash. Then, there is a moment of difficulty: there isn’t enough American currency for everyone. As a result, there is a Chinese chain of blame and lots of apologetic bowing, ever deeper . . . Ai steps forward, (pretending to be) angry with the client. Then, a minute later, Teacher Ai and the president of the company are shaking hands. Once more we hear Chinese laughter.

Flash forward: After a design period of 60 days, the architects return to Ordos, submitting their final proposals – a hundred over-scaled



Abandoned Kangbashi New Area, Ordos, China

jewellery boxes ready to be built. Whatever happened to Ai's dictum "It's about possibilities, not solid production"? The subsequent meeting seems to turn all of the architects into students. One hundred presentations are given. Some are rejected, and only a few get an encouraging pat on the shoulder from Teacher Ai, who at this point has become the client.

The movie is almost finished. Ai and his FAKE studio have made sure that the script has been meticulously followed. This operation was never about architecture, but about architecture's *unveiling* – the architect's predictability as the artwork?

The moment of farewell has arrived. Outside the monumental Holiday Inn, a bus awaits. "We'll be back," proclaim the architects while having their last picture taken with Ai, the *monstre sacré*. One architect whispers hesitantly: "I hope you invite us all back when the buildings are finished." His Chinese hosts laugh.

#### **Coda**

Ordos 100 never got built.