Exhibitions

Design with the Other 90%: Cities
Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum at the United Nations Visitor Center, New York City
15 October 2011–9 January 2012

Museum of Contemporary Craft and Action Center at Mercy Corps, Portland, Oregon
17 August 2012–5 January 2013

Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, Washington University, St. Louis, Missouri
14 September 2012–7 January 2013

David J. Sencer CDC Museum, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta
4 February–24 May 2013

A street vendor in Durban partners with an architect and a “social art and architecture” collective to build a prototype mobile vending cart (Spaza-de-Move-on) that serves as table, chair, and storage. Mobile phone programs are used to provide access to HIV information and testing kits (Text to Change, Uganda), transfer money from migrant workers back to their families (M-Pesa in Kenya), and provide a job listing network (Babajob.com in Bangalore). Modified river boats in Bangladesh become floating schools, libraries, and health clinics in flood-prone districts. In Caracas an Integral Urban Project replaces precarious resident-built stairways that climb the steep hills to the informal settlements above the city with concrete stairs whose public landings provide new spaces of social interaction while carrying beneath them critical infrastructure (water, sewage electricity, gas, and water lines). Architects and engineers working with community partners fashion new building materials out of local and recycled materials—insulation panels in Pakistan using straw and sludge from a nearby paper factory; bamboo loofah wall panels in Paraguay; cow dung bricks in Indonesia; stabilized soil blocks in Uganda. Grassroots Mapping in Lima and Map Kibera in Nairobi combine local data gathering with sophisticated digital applications to facilitate comprehensive planning. Incremental Housing in Iquique, Chile, provides the serviced half of a house (structure, wet areas, stairs, roof), allowing the resident to complete the adjacent part gradually with limited means. Guangzhou Bus Rapid Transit links outlying villages to the city center. Shack/Slum Dwellers International, a membership organization led by women operating in thirty-four countries, builds capacity among the urban poor with an emphasis on local credit and savings.

These are some of the sixty projects from forty countries documented in Design with the Other 90%: Cities, an exhibition mounted by the Cooper Hewitt National Design Museum. The context for the exhibition—which in the New York installation, on which this review is based, was located in the visitors lobby of the United Nations headquarters because of renovation work underway at the Cooper Hewitt’s own premises—is rapid global urbanization. The particular focus is on “slum dwellers,” defined by the UN-Habitat, co-host of the exhibition with the United Nations Academic Impact initiative, as people lacking access to one or more of five indicators: sufficient water, sanitation, security of tenure, durability of housing, and sufficient living area.

The entry panel to the exhibition establishes the urgency of the situation. An Informal Settlement World Map combines actual and projected population growth overall with the past and projected growth rates of the informal sector. Three video monitors portray eight settlements in six cities without sound or titles, letting the images speak for themselves. For the first time in history, a majority of the earth’s seven billion inhabitants lives in cities, a percentage that is expected to grow to 70 percent by 2050. More alarming is the number of those inhabitants who live in informal settlements, or “slums.” The current figure of one billion slum dwellers fails to register the situation of concentrated poverty that marks large portions of the globe. In Mexico City half of the ten million inhabitants live in slums; in the southern hemisphere more generally the figure is six in ten.

This is the dramatic backdrop against which the exhibition Design with the Other 90%: Cities is set. The display occupies four structural bays, with sets of drywall panels sandwiching pairs of columns. The deliberate plainness of the installation—large photos stapled to the walls—is appropriate to the theme and is more than compensated by the richness of visual documentation and physical artifacts, including conveyances, architectural models from professional and artisanal sources, full-scale mock-ups of wall panels and assembly systems, and a portion of a house
constructed with sandbag gabions visible outside the glass walls of the lobby.

This is a significant exhibition in two respects. As a social document it probes one of the most pressing issues of our time. In focusing attention on the haves and have-nots of the world, the exhibition may be seen in the context of the Occupy Wall Street movement (“We are the 99%”) and its progeny. It is worth noting that the exhibition’s predecessor effort, Design for the Other 90%, predates the Occupy movement by four years. The current exhibition may be viewed in the context of the burgeoning number of humanitarian architecture and design efforts in recent years, among them Architecture for Humanity, Public Architecture, Structures for Inclusion, and Architects/Designers/Planners for Social Responsibility.

The exhibition is also notable for its place in the history of design exhibitions. In its emphasis on indigenous origins it harkens back to Bernard Rudofsky’s landmark 1964 exhibition Architecture without Architects. But where Rudofsky’s powerful images celebrate the pure ingenuity of traditional builders, unmediated by contact with modern construction methods, Design with the Other 90%: Cities celebrates this precise conjunction, with local intelligence and skills being combined with advanced technology and research. A most welcome aspect of this exhibition is its wedding of design excellence with social application. Coming on the heels of the Museum of Modern Art’s important 2010 Small Scale, Big Change, the present exhibition helps to heal the breach between the two opened at MoMA in 1932, when the museum’s presentation of the international movement in architecture, curated by Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson, stripped the modern movement of its social core, presenting the architecture as style and relegating “housing” to a separate category outside the design discourse.

At the end of the day, it is hard to know whether to be more stunned by the magnitude of the problems of rapid urbanization or elated by the range of ingenious strategies to intervene in the informal settlements that house the majority of the new urbanites. The exhibition catalog presents the sixty projects (minus the videos and the physical models) and supplements them with four thoughtful essays and live extended interviews with actors in the field conducted by Cynthia E. Smith, the Curator for Socially Responsible Design at the Cooper-Hewitt Design Museum and the organizer of the exhibition. Her title is surely a sign that the social vocation of design is being recognized as an integral part of the enterprise, and not a fringe activity.

A project displayed on the last panel of the exhibition offers literal and compelling testimony to the power of design to inspire and catalyze. It is set in a riverside squatter settlement in Korail, the largest slum (population 120,000) in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, which is projected to be the world’s second largest city by 2015. Architect Khondaker Hasibul Kabir took up residence with the local Pervez family and worked with them to transform a barren piece of land outside their house into a garden and then to construct a “Platform of Hope” (Ashar Macha) suspended on bamboo poles above a lake adjoining the family house (Figure 1). The structure creates a gathering place for the community through the construction of a simple 18-by-36-foot wooden deck with open sides and a steeply pitched thatch roof. The platform immediately became a magnet for neighborhood children, since there was no other available public open space in the densely settled community. In response to a request for books, the Pervez family set up shelves and the platform became a library. Soon other neighbors began to plant areas around their own homes, all of this done under precarious circumstances since they were subject at any moment to quick eviction should other development plans for the site emerge. Nisima Pervez, the mother, summarized her feelings about the transformed environment: “Even if I stay here for one day I want to live in beauty.” She concludes, simply, “I want my daughter to be an architect.”

On 13 February 2012, Dhaka authorities demolished the Platform of Hope and its garden along with many houses and schools by the lake. This was followed by a second round of demolitions, two months later. The harsh measures provide a cautionary tale regarding the power of design to influence larger socioeconomic policies. They serve as a reminder that in addition to the problems of scalability inherent in the projects profiled in this exhibition, not all governments are prepared to work with slum dwellers to improve urban living conditions and create inclusive cities.

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Figure 1 Platform of Hope, built over Gulshan Lake, with Dhaka in background
(photo © Khondaker Hasibul Kabir)
The Pacific Standard Time shows scattered across Southern California are at once a condensation and a cornucopia of the arts stemming from this region. That this is a fraught starting point goes without saying, but the value of pulling together nearly seventy exhibitions in dozens of museums outweighs those concerns. For all the predictable kvetching by the likes of Dave Hickey in the New York Times about California’s provincial Promotionalism, the grand curatorial idea and collaboration among disparate institutions provided the momentum for some remarkable shows, to name a few: two installations in the San Diego area about light, the Hammer Museum’s show Now Dig This! Art and Black Los Angeles 1960–1980, and the subject of this review: Los Angeles County Museum of Art’s exhibition California Design 1930–1965: Living in a Modern Way (Figure 1). These three-and-a-half decades capture the era when modern design evolved in California, particularly in the Los Angeles region, to not only accommodate but shape modern life. A host of objects provides the evidence. Visitors see a quirky beauty in the Raymond Loewy Avanti car or Googie architecture, next to sexy backyard play-suits for homemakers, Henry Keck’s ubiquitous and functionally elegant salt, pepper, and sugar shakers, alongside Greta Magnusson Grossman’s sleek Formica desk and cheaply manufactured floor lamps. It was Grossman’s characterization of California’s predilection for “living in a modern way” that gave the show its title. The show valorizes common objects and brings some little-known geniuses to light. It testifies to the collapse of popular and academic art, collecting and consuming, the living room and the gallery, the studio and the factory. The power of these familiar, domestic objects is apparent with a little eavesdropping in the galleries: “I had one of these when I was in high school” or “This looks just like the chair in my grandparent’s family room.” The show’s lesson comes across without pedantry or political posturing: in California, the midcentury brought modernism to the 99 percent.

If you thought the appetite for midcentury modern was sated by Dwell magazine, the LACMA design show will disabuse you of that notion. All the trappings of California’s suburban norm are on display here. There is an ironic twist that these popular design products have been elevated from the tract house to the museum, but the installation does its best to keep things in their places without fetishizing them. Studebaker’s Avanti sits on a bed of the sparkling white gravel that stands in for the Arizona lawn; the furniture and furnishings are lined up for viewing in a manner more reminiscent of Barker Brothers or Ikea than the Museum of Modern Art. Design for the masses, as brought to California by the European émigrés (the subject of the excellent Exiles and Emigrés show at LACMA in 1997) grew less pretentious and less ideological in California. Rather than Bauhaus totalizations or the technical parameters of the Existentzminimum that arose in Germany, modernism in the American West could relax. Sunset magazine, graphically sophisticated record album covers, and Barbie demonstrate how the modern aesthetic slipped like so much high-fructose corn syrup into our daily diet. (Barbie of Mattel was the corporate sponsor of the show.)

The ambitious exhibition sets itself a nearly impossible task: to display decades of California design defined in the broadest of terms to include clothing, architecture, cars, toys, textiles, graphics, furniture, ceramics, interiors, and metalwork. On top of that, unlike other PST shows, this one admits design from all of California rather than just Southern California. The introductory wall text succinctly states the purpose: “This exhibition explores how the California of our collective imagination—a democratic utopia where a benign climate permitted life to be led informally and largely outdoors—was translated into a material culture that defined an era.” California is characterized as an exceptional rather than emblematic setting within popular modern American life, emerging