

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. 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

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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 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 show *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



Figure 1 Platform of Hope, built over Gulshan Lake, with Dhaka in background (photo © Khondaker Hasibul Kabir)

the sixty projects (minus the videos and the physical models) and supplements them with four thoughtful essays and five 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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