

Jellied scale model of lower Manhattan by Liz Hickock, from "You Are Here: Mapping the Psychogeography of New York City," Pratt Manhattan Gallery.

The *New City Reader* is a newspaper on architecture, public space and the city, published as part of "The Last Newspaper," an exhibition running at the New Museum of Contemporary Art from October 6, 2010–January 9, 2011. Conceived by executive editors Joseph Grima and Kazys Varnelis, the newspaper's content centers on the spatial implications of epochal shifts in technology, economy and society today. The *New City Reader* will consist of one edition published over the course of the project, with a new section produced weekly from within the museum's gallery space, each led by a different

guest editorial team of architects, theorists and research groups. These sections will be available free at the New Museum and—in emulation of a practice common in the nineteenth-century American city and still popular in China and other parts of the world today—will be posted in public on walls throughout the city for collective reading.

Next Week's issue will be **SPORTS**, guest edited by Jeannie Kim and Hunter Tura.

D-Crit—
Kimberlie Birks
John Cantwell
Barbara Eldredge
Molly Heintz
Stephanie Jönsson
Aileen Kwun
Avinash Rajagopal
Vera Sacchetti
Zachary Sachs
Amelie Znidaric

A Newspaper Of
Public Space

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New
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Reader**

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Leagues and Legions

"The Last Newspaper" is curated by Richard Flood and Benjamin Godsill. For more information please visit newmuseum.org

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**A Newspaper Of
Public Space**

The New City Reader

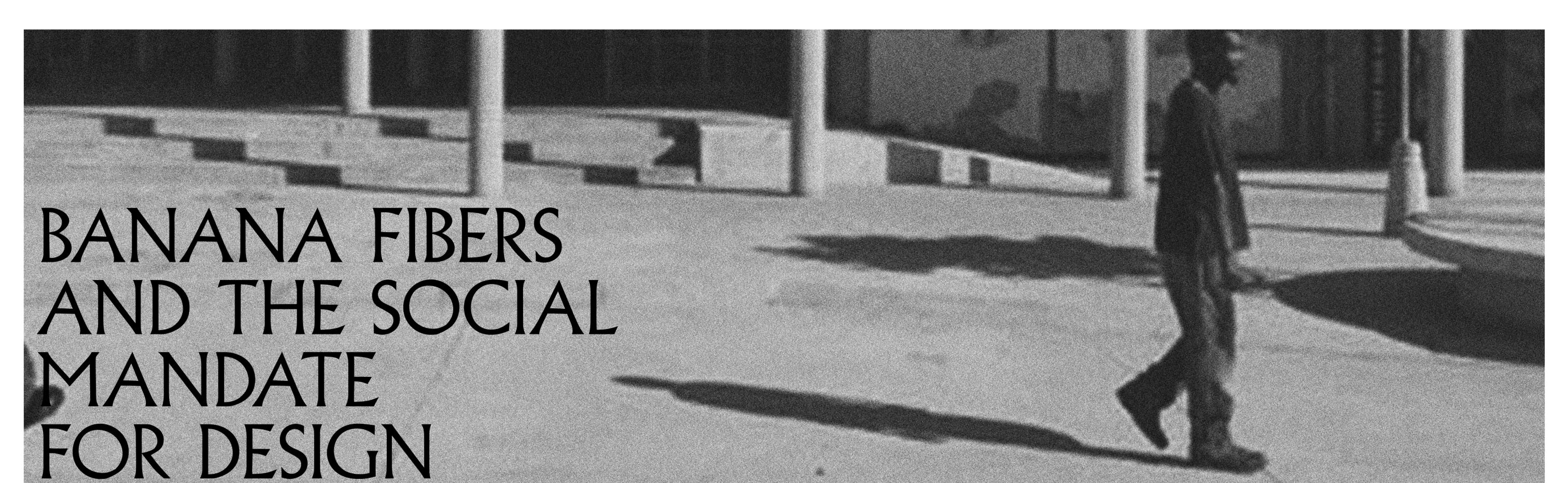
Culture is a slippery thing to write about. As critics, we set out to influence culture by analyzing it, but we find it changes shape even as we—and perhaps because we—observe it. Even the definition of the word eludes us. On one level, culture is a matter of art: aesthetic output, refinement and connoisseurship. But for anthropologists culture refers to knowledge, beliefs, means of expression, rituals and customs. Subcultures and other self-identified groups have their own “cultures,” which often operate in between these two meanings. And of course there is the recent democratization of production and diversification of consumption channels. Culture seems to be so comprehensive as to be synonymous with civilization itself.

In this context, the object of cultural criticism itself is ambiguous. Are we critiquing the cultural product—or ourselves? What hierarchies of information are meaningful in a culture where everyone can be a critic? As design critics, we try to come at this complex web of relationships from as many directions as possible to try to reach a full exploration of these dynamics. But dynamics don't exist in a vacuum. We need to probe contexts and define limits.

In this edition of the New City Reader, we address the following topics to analyze the contemporary cultural package:

- Kimberlie Birks explores New York's new playgrounds.
- John Cantwell peers behind the curtain of the e-reader.
- Barbara Eldredge slows down for a look at “Gatz” and what it could mean for news reporting.
- Molly Heintz investigates Fashion Week's uptown move.
- Stephanie Jönsson discusses the implications of seasonal pop-up storefronts.
- Aileen Kwun watches logos proliferate across both our cities and Twitter.
- Avinash Rajagopal and Vera Sacchetti look at exhibitions hoping to show us the design of social change.
- Zachary Sachs tracks changes in the literary archive.
- Amelie Znidaric attends the Architecture & Design Film Festival to view how the built environment is being filmed today.

D-Crit is the MFA in Design Criticism program at the School of Visual Arts in New York. Launched in 2008, this innovative two-year program trains students to research, analyze and evaluate design and its social and environmental implications.



BANANA FIBERS AND THE SOCIAL MANDATE FOR DESIGN

by Avinash Rajagopal & Vera Sacchetti

Elizabeth Scharpf reached into a tote bag, and with all the flair of a Vegas conjuror, pulled out strand after white candy floss strand of banana fibers. "This is the local material we chose to work with," she announced. The rabbit Scharpf was pulling out of the hat was her miraculous sanitary pad innovation for Rwandan village women. The occasion: her acceptance speech for the Curry Stone Design Prize 2010, which she won for the social venture SHE, which launches businesses "to address some of the world's most pressing problems."

As ever, the world seems extraordinarily pressed with problems. The ice caps are melting, ducks are covered with crude oil, children are starving somewhere in Africa and we're losing our jobs. If the multitude of conferences, awards and exhibitions in New York are anything to go by, architects and designers are all over it. The Cooper-Hewitt's "Why Design Now?" conference—where Scharpf's banana fibers were first greeted by appreciative titters—answered its titular question with the rather ambitious subtitle "Solving Global Challenges." A new show at the Museum of Modern Art, "Small Scale, Big Change," is advocating social engagement in architecture, through eleven projects from around the world. And the Curry Stone Design Prize 2010 awards \$100,000 for addressing "critical issues such as access to clean air, food and water, shelter, health care, energy, education, social justice and the promotion of peace."

It's clear to any designer listening—big problems are the only problems worth solving. But is this design's inconvenient truth? An emphasis on reducing materials and cutting back on wasteful consumption,

sustainability can only offer so much fuel for the design machine. So the agenda moved from protecting the ozone layer to saving underprivileged people. At the "Why Design Now?" conference, the panel on green design was just a pit stop on the way to the biggest goal of them all—Design for Social Change.

Presentations like Stephen Burks' and Timothy Prestero's won the crowd over. Burks brings business from the developed world to artisans in less fortunate places. He is currently working on a TV show in which he will fly to places like Nicaragua and Senegal, spend ten days with a struggling yet skilled craftsman, and produce globally successful products. Prestero, the head of the touchingly named firm Design That Matters, is an engineer working in hospitals in Nepal. Shocked by the inhumane infant care facilities, Prestero worked with local nurses to fashion a baby incubator for the developing world—made of car parts. The formula for changing the world through design is at hand: go backpacking through a third world country of your choice, find an underprivileged community with a big, intractable problem and solve it with a small, local solution.

The inherent asymmetry of this rationale is too perfect. The dramatic idea of a small intervention producing meaningful change in a society is especially appealing to the designer's ego. While we're at it, the massive effort can be conveniently reduced to a series of beneficent images. These images are also a dutiful curator's dream come true. At MoMA's "Small Scale, Big Change," almost all the architectural projects feature at least one smiling, colored person, jubilant at this gift from the all-knowing architect. Neuro Wolff Architects photographed their Red Location Museum of Struggle in South Africa with African children

riding bicycles in the foreground. Adorable Venezuelan kids share a hilarious joke sitting in Urban-Think Tank's Metro Cable in Caracas. Curator Andres Lepik actually travelled to each of the projects to assure himself of their success, but as to what criteria he used to measure this success, we are kept blissfully in the dark.

Instead, we have the procession of freighted images—not unlike those deployed by hunger- and poverty-oriented NGOs since the 1980s—standing as their own guarantors of efficacy. The smile on a child's face is proof of the designer's achievement. If the Rwandan women and the Nepali doctors seem satisfied at the moment of the snapshot, then we are to believe that all is well. These people hang in timeless limbo, their positive futures inferred. All other information is secondary, not of immediate concern. The idyllic image reigns supreme, aesthetizing the "other"—the denizen of the developing world rounding the corner from despair to design.

So much so that it is replacing the slick computer rendering as the aspirational image for designers and architects. The promise of gritty reality is a siren call for those of us who'd like to think of ourselves as socially responsible. Succoring people in a remote land and an alien culture is a designerly atonement for our colonial past and our consumerist present. There may be significance to the fact that the Curry Stone Design Prize went to Elizabeth Scharpf, an American working in Africa; rather than to Chilean architects building in Chile or a Guatemalan co-operative working in its own country.

The visual onslaught of the Design for Social Change movement has ensured that we go about our first world lives carrying the entire developing world in our heads. The new mandate for design means that even as we

The dramatic idea of a small intervention producing meaningful change in a society is especially appealing to the designer's ego.

slouch over shiny MacBooks in our Brooklyn studios, our thoughts are with the menstruating girls in Rwanda.

Lost in this well-meaning wave of design output is a discussion about the limits of the practice. Our foolhardy notion of design as a panacea ignores a long history of troubled global politics and economy. The current "solutions" reinforce an existing inequality in our world-view. So before we get swept away by this rather lopsided vision of Western design saving the world, someone should fund a new exercise. Let's bring the Rwandan girls to New York and have them take a good look at our problems. How would they see our exorbitant real estate, our obsession with fashion, our constant need for speed? We want to change their world with banana fibers, maybe they will transform our society with our bagels and cream cheese.

Photo by Iwan Baan



TINKERING WITH THE PLAYGROUND

by Kimberlie Birks

Play is a child's work, as the old adage goes. In October 1903—when work was still a child's domain—New York City pioneered the country's first permanent playground in Seward Park. The playground, designed to get children from the Lower East Side tenements off the street, served as a model for decades, looking much like the playgrounds most adults today grew up on. But in recent times, boxed in by an increasingly litigious society and perpetual parental anxiety, playgrounds have been tamed. From the frame-and-platform structures that evolved with a traditional swing, sandbox, seesaw and slide, playground equipment today is lower, slower, safer and far less challenging. Yet while the urban playground shrinks, our need for it expands. Studies show that children today spend fifty percent less time outdoors than they did twenty years ago. While school recess time diminishes, evidence mounts for the positive impact of unstructured play on childhood learning and creativity.

In July, Po Bronson and Ashley Merryman published "The Creativity Crisis," a *Newsweek* feature that revealed that, for the first time in fifty years, American creativity scores are falling. While technologically enriched environments continue to make children's IQ scores rise, creativity scores

have been in steady decline since 1990, with the trend most pronounced for children in kindergarten through sixth grade. The *Newsweek* study reports that the correlation to lifetime creative accomplishment is three times stronger for childhood creativity than IQ. "Children should get out more," writes Lawrence Downes in a recent *New York Times* editorial, citing the viewpoint of pedagogical theorist Gever Tully. "They should learn to work with their hands, not just their Nintendo thumbs. Because if they don't, they risk stunting their independence, ingenuity, curiosity and competence."

Happily, New York has fresh new playground pioneers who are giving credence to the belief that child's play is serious work. In a city blessed with the architectural prowess of New York, the unveiling of a new playground seems an unlikely candidate to garner much media attention. However, this past summer, the opening of South Street Seaport's Imagination Playground made headlines in publications ranging from the *New Yorker* to *Time* and the *Wall Street Journal*. What makes Imagination Playground unusual is not only its design but its designer: celebrity architect David Rockwell. As the design-mind behind numerous popular New York restaurants, as well as Hollywood's Academy Theater and Las Vegas' Mohegan Sun casino, Rockwell might be said to have always been in the business of designing playgrounds—just not ones geared at tots. Five years in the making, his focus on children resulted in a playground where usually fixed elements have become moveable: traditional swings and jungle gyms have been replaced by 450 large blue blocks that appear

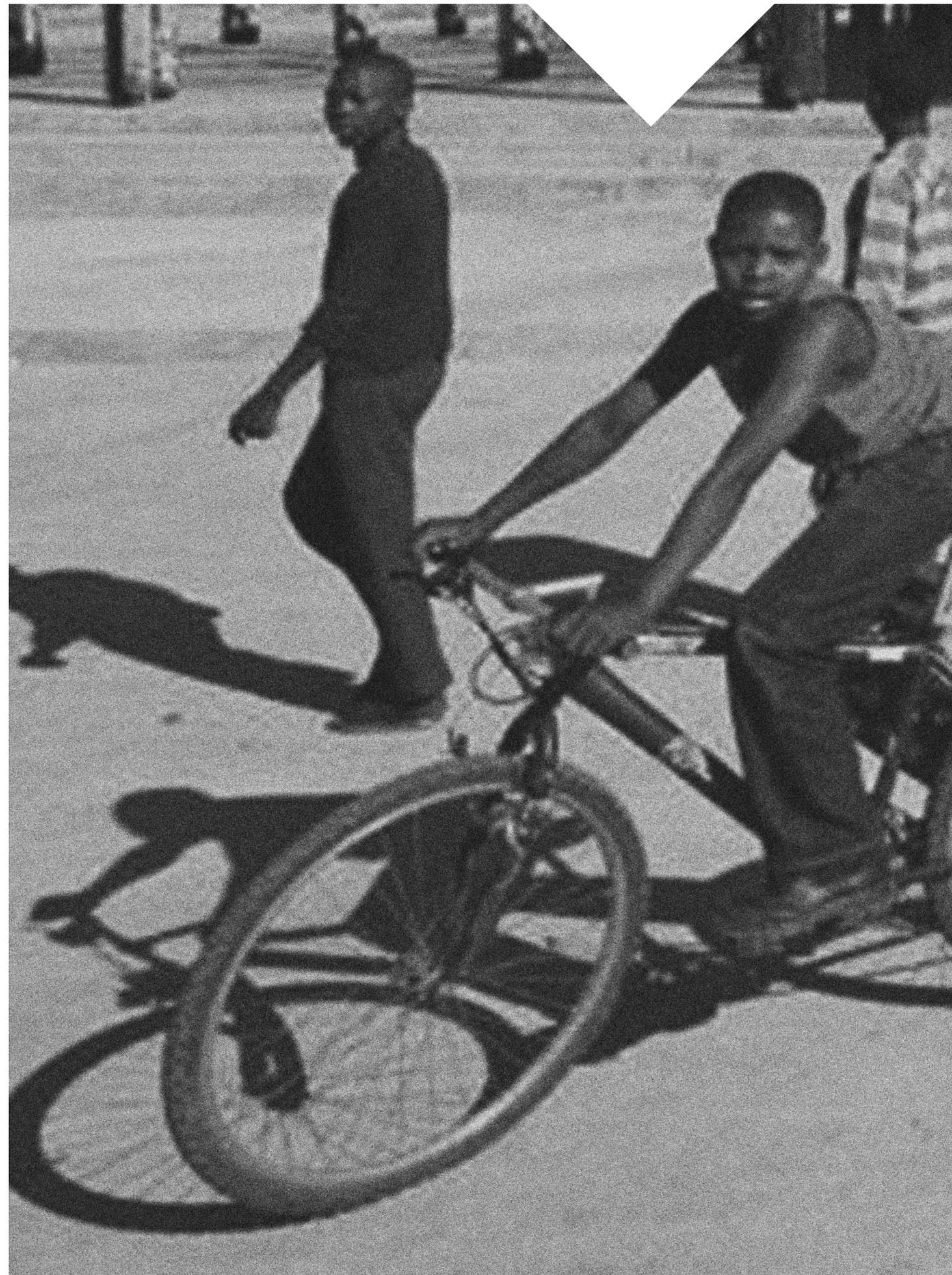
to be the giant foam descendants of Tinkertoys. The hope is that, under the supervision of adult "play workers," children will become the architects of their own playground.

Rockwell is not alone. Recent months have seen other notable architects playing in New York City's parks. Michael Van Valkenburgh's designs for Union Square, Brooklyn Bridge Park and downtown Manhattan's Teardrop Park are pioneering new and nuanced ways to integrate playgrounds into their surroundings, something most playgrounds blatantly disregard. Meanwhile Frank Gehry is set to release plans next month for his own undulating ode to play in Battery Park.

While the trend of having high-profile architects responding to play areas seems designed to prompt a big thumbs-up from a design-savvy segment of society, the recent uber-designing of New York's playgrounds raises concerns. *Wired*'s winning entry for its monthly reader challenge question "what will our playgrounds of the future look like?" facetiously depicted a Jean Nouvel plan for a 2024 Lower East Side playground. The monstrous complex cleverly poked at the underbelly of the trend, replete with a Purell decontamination chamber, Bugaboo stroller rink and a Pratt & Whitney 10-G merry-go-round. We might ask if the starchitect is really needed to design playgrounds or if this is just another way in which we are over-designing childhood? Of course we want the best for our children, but do we know what that is? Who is all of this design really for: the children or their parents? And are these facilities serving the segments of the population that need them most? Is such design really feasible for any but a few big-city blocks?

When it comes to the playground, we are still tinkering with the elements of what we can build and what we can believe in. While the wonders of Rockwell, Van Valkenburgh and Gehry will likely not reach the child in small-town America, perhaps the conversations started in the sandboxes of Manhattan will. Rockwell's recent partnership with play-advocacy group KaBOOM! is a hopeful first step. With the development of Playground in a Box—a boxed set of 75 biodegradable foam blocks in fifteen different shapes—Rockwell and KaBOOM! are working to distribute their design at a smaller scale to playgrounds and elementary schools across the country. This summer, ten playgrounds across the five boroughs of New York City were provided with a set; several more were sent nationwide. "It is going to change the narrative about what is the best type of play for kids, and parents will start to demand those elements," KaBOOM! CEO Darell Hammond said. Though we are still many building blocks away, perhaps these architects will succeed in empowering us. A century after the opening of Seward Park, it is once again time for New York to be a playground pioneer.

Photo: <http://www.imaginationplayground.org>





SHE DOWN-LOADED WITH BATED BREATH

by John Cantwell

Producers of erotic materials have always been among the first to successfully leverage new technologies for profit. In the 1980s, VHS video revolutionized the porn industry and in the '90s, long before the dot-com rush took off in earnest, adult websites were already establishing themselves as leaders in the emergent medium of the Internet.

Today e-readers like Amazon's Kindle and the Sony Reader are fueling a similar boom in erotic literature. While the publishing industry as a whole continues to struggle—*Publishers Weekly* reports that August 2010 was the second straight month in which sales in all print trade segments declined—the erotica category is growing. Doreen DeSalvo, Chief Financial Officer of loose-id.com, an online publisher and retailer of erotica, states that her company has experienced growth of 20–30% over the past two years, coinciding with the widespread public adoption of e-readers. The current erotic best-seller at Amazon, Kelly Jamieson's "Love Me," ranks four slots ahead of Jonathan Franzen's "Freedom" on the site's list of bestsellers for the Kindle.

As the precedents of home video and Internet availability demonstrated, the affordance of privacy is the e-reader's key advantage. Purchases are immediate and discreet—no embarrassing trips to the store, no suspicious deliveries to the home. E-readers can be password protected to keep away prying eyes. And perhaps most importantly for those who read in public, there are no steamy book covers to betray what you're reading.

While previous technologies pushed erotica into the home, farther from public view, networked objects like e-readers, smart phones and tablets are having the opposite effect. These devices allow for public consumption of erotic literature (though images and video still seem problematic) without the perceived stigma.

Of course, while sex and public space has long been a fraught issue, this intersection is also where innovative practices of community-building can occur. In his essay "Privacy Could Only Be Had In Public: Gay Uses of the Streets," George Chauncey writes that users of public space have always been able to "develop tactics that allow them to use the space in alternative, even oppositional ways: Nothing illustrates this



general principle more clearly than the tactics developed by generations of gay men and lesbians to put the spaces of the dominant culture to queer purpose."

It's more difficult to characterize the nature of reading erotica in public. Ostensibly, the experience is still largely private—since no one knows what you're reading on an e-reader, the implications could be thought of as similar to listening to music in public on an iPod. You're not identifying yourself with a certain artist or genre, but rather with the community of people who use these devices. However, as Virginia Heffernan recently noted while writing about the Kindle in the *New York Times*, "Reading... is only superficially solitary; in fact, it's a form of intensive participation in language and the building of common culture."

An analysis of digital erotica consumer demographics reveals some potentially surprising facts about this "common culture." Eighty percent of customers at loose-id.com are women, according to DeSalvo. BDSM titles are the most popular at loose-id, a finding echoed by Lyndon Smith, a founder of Adult eBook Shop. These kinds of titles, according to Ms. DeSalvo, are not being published even by mainstream erotica imprints. Man-on-man titles are also finding a larger audience with straight women. Ms. DeSalvo guesses this is because, "Women still have less sexual agency than men, gay or straight." The prevalence of these stories,

in turn, offers a kind of affirmation for their readers—an acknowledgment that someone out there understands their needs.

And still there are other facets of community afforded by e-readers: the "most-highlighted" feature on Kindles, mentioned in Ms. Heffernan's article, is a kind of "crowd-sourced literary criticism" that allows readers to see the passages and phrases most often highlighted by other readers of the same title. In this way, a channel of anonymous communication has been created for erotica readers on the Kindle. It is the kind of communication that meets Charles W. Moore's standard for "participation without embarrassment" when engaging in public activities.

This new dynamic between digital erotica and public space allows readers to both consume more freely and, through channels of consumption and digital interaction, create a kind of virtual community. It speaks to the evolving give-and-take between revelation and concealment, desire and taboo. Perhaps Kelly Jamieson sums the situation up best in her dedication at the beginning of "Love Me": "To my wonderful family, even though my kids aren't allowed to read this!"

Original photo by goXunuReviews

SLOW NEWS

by Barbara Eldredge

Last week, I sat in a darkened theater and watched an anonymous man walk into a shabby, nondescript office, remove his coat and unsuccessfully attempt to start his computer. To find the information he needed, he instead opened his Rolodex and improbably produced a worn paperback from which he began to read aloud. It was the first sentence of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, and over the next eight hours—with two intermissions and a dinner break—Fitzgerald's spoken prose wove a strange spell over the man, his coworkers and the audience. Remarkably, in this high-pressure, high-speed age, hundreds of people paid for the luxury of turning off their phones to watch a man read a book. It struck me, during this performance, that the news industry could learn a thing or two from the theater.

People value more than information or "content," they value experiences. Theatrical events such as this, Elevator Repair Service's "Gatz," have different (some would say more) value than their technologically mediated counterparts, because like the "slow food" movement, they are participatory and experiential. From the ashes of failed newspapers and magazines, a new journalistic mode may emerge, one that transmutes news content into a valued experiential form: a Slow News movement.

In 1935, a decade after Fitzgerald published *The Great Gatsby*, the Federal Theater Project formed "The New York Living Newspaper Unit" to employ out-of-work journalists and theater practitioners. Their dramatizations, focused on current events and issues such as affordable electricity and tenement slums, satiated a public's need to engage with the news. But despite their success—or because of it—the House Committee on Un-American Activities closed down the Unit after only three years.

Slow News would harness this same communicative impact of theater to engage the public with current events, providing an anecdotal antidote to the alienation and civic indifference of lives hypermediated by technology. This theatrical journalism would reclaim public space as informational space through public readings and dramatizations of current events. It would not aim to boost ratings or sell advertisements but to engage, address and notify the public.

Television shows like "The Daily Show" and "The Colbert Report" illustrate the popular value of performative news in a Fast News culture. But because this news experience is reliant upon screens viewed in private space, there is no opportunity for involvement or collective action. By informing a collective of people in a common physical space and illustrating how issues like world poverty and war relate to their lives, theatrical journalism could provide impetus for positive change. Clifford Odets' 1935 play "Waiting For Lefty," a dramatization of the conditions leading up to the 1934 New York cab driver strike, nearly incited the audience to riot after its first performance. By injecting the news cycle with corporeality and temporality, live theatrical journalism has the capacity to empower the public in a way that conventional news cannot.

Newsworthy information could be supplied by any means: word of mouth, interviews, Internet research or the national media, but the bulk of the news would be related to a community's "newsregion." Journalists would translate the facts into "Living Newspaper"-style pieces and perform them in parks, restaurants and living rooms. Community members could gather to watch Slow Newscasts, engaging collectively with current issues and events on local, national and international levels. Stimulated by this social setting for news, they would feel more empowered to act: to address poverty and pollution, to contact legislators and to alter their own habits in an effort to improve the world.

Citizens would be encouraged to participate not just as audience members but also as news-writers and performers. The line between journalist and citizen, already weakened by the rise of blogging and Internet commentary, would further dissolve. Local participation has fallen with placeless virtual interaction, but the Slow News movement would enable the news to return to the public realm and inspire action. While the Internet sates our desire for instant information, Slow Newscasts would liberate information from text and technology to provide communal, participatory news experiences.

If the narrator's computer hadn't been broken in the beginning of "Gatz," he never would have found the novel and been caught up in its spell. If we had the opportunity to tear ourselves away from our screens to experience news in the way he experienced *The Great Gatsby*, the results could be rewarding beyond measure.

Slow Newscasts would liberate information from text and technology to provide communal, participatory news experiences.

by Molly Heintz

In a city of spectacular events, New York's Fashion Week is surely one of the most curious. Invitation-only, it never has been a populist celebration like the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, for example. But until this fall, the semiannual bloom of white tents was still a spectacle that emanated an undeniable energy, a glittering gravitational pull. This was thanks in part to its location in Bryant Park, the geographical center of Manhattan, a site that encouraged Fashion Week's colors, lights, music and participants—editors, models, photographers, PETA protesters—to spill out into the surrounding streets. The result was a bizarre and sometimes messy mash-up with the quotidian activities of New Yorkers.

This September, the Council of Fashion Designers of America (CFDA) moved Fashion Week to a new home at Lincoln Center. Situated in Damrosch Park in the southwest corner of the performing arts complex, the tents are still in use, but they are tucked behind a five-story

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monolithic façade that seamlessly blends into its surroundings. The camouflage is achieved with vinyl printed to match Lincoln Center’s acres of travertine and stretched tight across scaffolding. A paler version of the stele from Kubrick’s “2001,” the new object looms at the edge of the expansive plaza, presenting a pristine public face that conceals the crazy goings-on inside.

When it decided to move Fashion Week to Lincoln Center, the CFDA ostensibly sought to alleviate the logistical nightmares of Bryant Park’s midtown thoroughfare. Traffic snarled as equipment was loaded in and out, and designers complained about the space limitations and cost. But aside from addressing practical concerns, the new location, nestled in between the New York State Theater and the Metropolitan Opera, reinforces the elevation of fashion shows to the level of priestly performance art. Once, buyers and editors came to shows for a preview of the designer’s next collection, but today private meetings and showings take place in the designer’s studio long before the show goes on. Now that the shows have lost their original commercial function, they are essentially pure spectacle, their primary product images in the form of photographs for public consumption.

The introduction last year of Fashion’s Night Out—the one-night citywide kick-off to the week where boutiques stay open late amid roaming bands of models and performance groups—was intended to make the uninvited followers of fashion feel like they can still be part of what’s happening inside the tents. But geographically diffuse and geared towards shopping, it’s no substitute for Fashion Week’s Bryant Park venue, the critical mass of chaotic and kitschy activity that provided this photo fodder and amplified the messy—and fun—aspects of the city itself. When the runway overflowed onto the sidewalk, the public itself could for a short time turn into temporary audience and fashion critic. Now that the event is at Lincoln Center, the give and take with the city streets no longer exists. As a New Yorker, whether you care about the Fashion Week scene or not, a brush with the energy of the tents could still be a little thrill or at least an awareness that this is the kind of mad, fleeting event that makes New York New York.

RICKY’S—PERENNIAL POP-UP

by Stephanie Jönsson

Dress-up time is never so au fait. Earlier this month the windows of a former Brooklyn laundromat sprung to life with a jumble of brightly colored placards announcing the revival of the skeletal recesses of the space. The advertisements portray polished approximations of Snooki, Lady Gaga, JetBlue’s “Angry Steward” and other ephemeral icons of popular culture, all basking in the glow of their fifteen-minutes-of-faux-pas. Even within that, it’s hard to miss the brightly illustrated shape of a squeezed tube of ambiguous turquoise paste, the bubblegum-pink Ricky’s logo emblazoned in the center.

Ricky’s pop-up explosion occurs annually in early autumn, with stores as numerous and bright as stoop-side Jack-o’-lanterns.

Halloween creates the opportunity to completely change one’s identity for a day, and Ricky’s posits itself as a willing participant in this enterprise, cornering the New York City market as a masterful proponent of the art of disguise. The campy beauty supply and costume retail chain was founded in 1989 by brothers Ricky and Todd Kenig, Todd’s wife Carmen and business partner Dominick Costello. Its origins were rooted in an independent pharmacy founded in the 1970s by the Kenig brothers’ father, Al. But as Duane Reade, CVS and Rite Aid engulfed the market in the 1980s, the Kenig brothers decided to transform the modest pharmacy into the over-the-top store it is today.

This year the chain’s pop-up density has reached an all-time high, with over 40 locations throughout the five boroughs and a smattering in the Tri-State Region. While pop-up stores began

proliferating across the city several years ago as a way for rent-starved landlords to fill vacant spaces for a few weeks between long-term leases, they now have a new function thanks to the protracted recession. Commercial storefronts are quietly playing host to a revolving cast of month-to-month retailers, giving merchants the opportunity to create more buzz for their buck with no obligation to lease permanently.

Ricky’s sets the model for how a chain can use the temp-friendly climate to test-drive locations, feel out the clientele and use their demographic findings to establish permanent locations. Ricky’s studies merchandise sold at a particular pop-up store to judge the values of the community. As a store whose target demographic is primarily adults—women in particular—a dearth in sexy costume sales in a stroller-heavy community says a lot more about the spending priorities of the mother than her choice of superhero costume for her toddler.

The pop-up’s short-term nature creates built-in hype, drawing customers to nearby stores on the same block and helping landlords boost rents. While the mutually beneficial landlord-retailer relationship seems to be an auspicious undertaking, there is a catch. The graphic garishness of Ricky’s aesthetic is, by itself, a strident and successful campaign, but when combined with the intrigue of a pop-up location during an appropriately costume-centric holiday, a landlord would be hard-pressed to find an equally effective tenant. For independent businesses in particular, the pop-up store requires an enormous investment: hiring employees, estimating necessary merchandise, installing appropriate fixtures and decorations and more. And while Ricky’s has managed to turn the pop-up into a worthwhile endeavor, the gains for less stable vendors may not be worth the risk involved.

The current popularity of a here-today-gone-tomorrow store with a flair for theatricality such as Ricky’s is not surprising. The protracted economic downturn has enabled the pop-up model, as retailers and landlords alike forsake long-term stability for short-term profit. Like the Sarah Palin and Spice Girl ensembles of yesteryear, duffed in the hollows of a crawlspace or doomed to plague the last page of an unclicked Ebay auction—or for those less sentimental, out at the curb along with the rest of the post-holiday trash—the pop-up stores are loved-hard and short-lived. The transience of both has never felt so timely.

Photo: M.V. Jantzen; <http://www.flickr.com/photos/mvjantzen/467051115/sizes/o/in/photostream/>



ARCHITECTURE PLAYS THE LEAD

by Amelie Znidaric

When architecture meets film, many people think of the great sets that made films from Fritz Lang’s “Metropolis,” to “Blade Runner” to Christopher Nolan’s intricately realized worlds-within-worlds so memorable. But this is a limited view of architecture, more as special effect than an exploration of practice or industry or the huge effects it has on the world. In a sense it has been relegated to a supporting role in this huge cultural exponent.

But recently the first Architecture & Design Film Festival, which ran from October 14–18 at New York’s Tribeca Cinemas, screened more than 40 documentaries on architecture, graphic and furniture design. With feature-length films to shorts (some just a few minutes long), the festival has now brought architecture into a much more serious and relevant discussion.

Showing architecture and design as protagonists, rather than as a backdrop or prop, was a conscious decision for architect Kyle Bergman and design professional Laura Cardello, who conceived the festival together. It is not easy to portray architecture, whose process of creating and experiencing space has many more levels than the visual. However, pictures—still and moving—are how the world primarily receives architecture and design.

Few people had as much influence in this regard than the late architectural photographer Julius Shulman. As the documentary “Visual Acoustics,” a highlight of the festival, explains, Shulman’s iconic and prolific work not only taught us how to look at buildings, but sharpened our vision of them for almost fifty years.

“Space Land and Time: Underground Adventures with Ant Farm” takes a look at the work that emanated from this groundbreaking San Francisco-based architecture/art collective. In contrast with, or in addition to, Shulman’s legacy, Ant Farm taught us how to look beyond buildings. Unflinchingly filming their work, the group set new standards of how to define space—when presenting their inflatables in 1971, for example, or their iconic installation “Cadillac Ranch” in 1974.

And even historical documents of famous structures, such as the 1967 documentary “Monument to a Dream,” starring Eero Saarinen’s Gateway Arch in St. Louis, bear witness to the spirit of adventure and suspense that accompanies great ambition. Feverishly, we watch architecture and engineering confronting gravity, weather, time and idiosyncratic material qualities. Of course, we know that the elegant parabola still stands tall in St. Louis, yet as we watch the film we bite our lips. Will they make it?

Shulman, Ant Farm and their peers set the ground for a flood of information about architecture and design that befell us in the following decades. Where print media used to dominate design discourse, now the subject has migrated to many different media. This festival could not have existed even a decade ago—there were not enough films and arguably not enough of an audience. The design literacy promoted through books, magazines, ads, shop windows, exhibitions, TV shows and of course, the Internet, have completely changed our perception of architecture and design. In curating some of architecture’s rich filmed history, the Architecture & Design Film Festival has recorded this cultural shift. It is an event that was long overdue—architecture is ready for its closeup.



Above left and below: from the film, “Space, Land and Time: Underground Adventures with Ant Farm”

Left: from the film, “Studio Gang Architects: Aqua Tower”





GAP'S TWEET DEFEAT

by Aileen Kwun

Corporate heads at Gap, Inc. have their boyfriend-cut denim jeans in a bunch from the shame of their recent rebranding flop. In an effort to renew appeal to its target Millennial consumer, the retail giant recently released an update to its stalwart, classic serif logo of more than twenty years. Within hours of its weekday morning online posting, Twitter's outrage had boiled over. By noon the next day, a friend of mine who normally does not keep abreast of design news text messaged me from her shiny new fourth-generation iPhone to ask: "so what do u think of this new gap logo lol, so fug right :)? Glad to see it gone". Unarmed with a smart-phone and only an occasional user of Twitter, I was apparently behind the times. A quick Google search to see what she was talking about, and I had found that in the 48 hours following the new logo's

unveiling, the president of Gap North America had revoked the new design, announced a forthcoming crowdsourcing project for its replacement via Facebook, then changed her mind again: the company would be sticking with its decades-old logo after all.

The birth and death of a logo may seem a trifle to some, but its presence leaves a lasting impression on our communities beyond the Internet's immaterial space. A logo, drafted as a .tif file in Photoshop, carries the potential to transcend its medium into a large number of physical objects during its lifetime. From digital to architectural, 2-D to 3-D, logos seemingly materialize everywhere in our awareness—onto price tags, shopping bags, print campaigns, storefronts, marquees, billboards and whole exteriors of buildings; in densely commercial spaces, logos collectively span entire blocks.

The visual bombardment of the urban pedestrian has been the seed of many projects, from the seminal writings of architects Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown in the 60s and 70s to the large-scale works of artists Christoph Steinbrener and Rainer Dempf, who in their 2005 project "Delete!" set the entire city of Vienna awash in yellow by wrapping every single piece of commercial signage in monochromatic plastic and cloth. The result was a mind-boggling inverse of this year's Academy Award-winning animated short, "Logorama," which depicted all but the pavement of a future Los Angeles consisting entirely of logos, from building to car to person. Extreme as it seems, the vision may not be so far off.

Even as technology promotes an increasingly fragmented, self-customized society of "Generation Me," the individual only has so much say in what they choose to view outside the

screen's comforting environment. Yet the rebranding efforts of Gap—halted within a matter of days—never left the Web page, an instance of how design criticism can be retrospectively exercised to evaluate not only what has already been produced, but to preempt what a motivated group deems should never make it to production at all.

In the days following the logo debacle, mass media coverage of the logo change seemed to regard the visible critique surrounding a singular logo redesign—just one of many by the multi-billion dollar branding industry—as an absurd sign of our postmodern times, a conversation of hyperbolic importance over Western corporate hijinx by its hopelessly screen-addicted consumers. But what the news outlets failed to highlight, in their summation and gently mocking analyses of commenteering in the Twitterverse, is how absurdly fitting the social platform proved to be for en masse design criticism.

The commercial role of a logo, if well-executed, is to promote and evoke a common, instantaneous response of recognition and desire within a mass consumer base. And in the culture of 140-character one-liners and on-the-fly text messaging, feedback arrives through knee-jerk statements of terse instantaneity. In their exercise of self-broadcasting, Gap's online detractors provided near-unanimous market research without having been solicited for it. And, determined by their consensus, the pronounced failure of the Gap logo marks a significant loosening of the tightly controlled output of corporate design and its stronghold on popular visual culture.

By the time this very piece comes to print, there will be little power remaining in this press: ruminations upon the Gap logo

launch and failure will be obsolete, considerations of its Helvetica type and the sad, blue-colored gradient chip on its shoulder beyond yesterday. Graphic design bloggers and desk-chair critics have already moved on to discuss the new GapBodyFit logo, a curved 'G' whose letterform might too closely mimic the profile of a scrotum for comfort.

The hive is having fun and sees no reason to relent. There is a lot of free brand consulting work to be done.

Photo courtesy Steinbrener/Dempf;
www.steinbrener-dempf.com

ON BOOKS— UNBUILDING AN ARCHIVE

by Zachary Sachs

The first page of a handwritten draft for "Infinite Jest" is barely legible. Blue ballpoint squiggles cling tightly to the baseline, occasionally bounded by arcing additions or suddenly interrupted by vicious cancellations. Throughout the David Foster Wallace Collection, which opened to researchers in September 2010 at the Harry Ransom Center at The University of Texas at Austin, one is struck by Wallace's incredible attachment to the written mark. Selections from his library teem with marginalia, and sheaves of manuscripts are covered by iterated corrections in color-coded ink. But Wallace is an aberration. The Ransom Center, alongside all archives like it, will soon face a drought of this sort of physical record. The effect of word processors on twenty-first century literary history remains to be seen, but their aggregate effect today is unquestionably destructive.

In some cases the damage is mitigated. Salman Rushdie's archive, already being organized by Emory University, displays that writer's fastidious attachment to the preservation of his digital drafts. An emulation of his 1995 Apple Performa displays his contributions to the *New York Times* not only in their original form, but on their original software. Yet one can only imagine how the accelerating advance of technology will render this approach staggeringly complex. Norman Mailer died with drafts languishing on two sizes of floppy disks and three nicotine-stained computers. Many archivists opt, understandably, just to print everything out.

But the larger problem is not the nature of the final product, but the writing process the word processor encourages. Novelists, poets and essayists less meticulous than Rushdie—this writer included—are often themselves no longer able to consult the previous states of their work. Once one reflexively hits "Save" after a long spell, they're all gone. It may be a cliché that modernity has forced people ever further into an unreflective present, but this has come to be painfully felt by writers and archivists alike: a menu-command in a piece of software now offers instant and inextricable destruction of the history of a work of art.

The situation is complicated by software features designed not so much to preserve drafts as to inoculate against data loss. In the '90s, that golden era of the computer crash, Microsoft Word introduced "Autosave," which rescued writers from having to save manually at intervals but offered only a single prior draft. "Revert," favored by Google Docs, ostensibly returns choice to the user but offers only a binary selection between versions. More advanced (and infrequently used) features furnish users with a record of each saved iteration, but their scope is unclear.

What, after all, ought to constitute a revision? Every session? Every "Autosave"? Every keystroke?

It's astonishing to think today how effortlessly the old system of hand-markings and re-typings navigates this distance—showing at once changes in substance and rationale. A single page preserves both data and its metadata. The physical model for composition remains, bafflingly, the most complete. Existing archives at institutions like the Ransom Center provide not only a body of data for researchers, but a physical framework: rows of chronological containers that encode in their material nature—smell, coloration, even state of decay—the contact between these works and the world in which they came to exist. The alternative offered by word processors, as it stands, is a sequence of decimals recorded in an uncomfortable compromise between software and conscientiousness.

It's true that any writer interested in these issues has the opportunity to print and notate physical drafts. But it isn't simply the manic or exaggeratedly dutiful writer who needs preservation, and writers without that saintly patience or presence of mind are now eased into a position to casually undermine the long-practiced efforts of the institutions that may end up with their estates. If software proves incapable of overcoming this limitation, we stand to inherit a world of letters that's flattened and opaque. There, any given text's relation to its own development will be effectively imaginary.

We stand to inherit a world of letters that's flattened and opaque.

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