

Design With, Instead of for, the Other 90%

By Allison Arieff



Yerwada Slum Upgrading Project, Pune, India, courtesy SDI

"Design with the Other 90%: CITIES," a new exhibit opening this month at the United Nations in New York and curated by the Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, reveals how the design community is attempting to define a better role for itself than in prior years, one that's more collaborative than pedagogic or paternalistic. The designers featured immerse themselves in needy communities in order to provide valuable knowledge and skill sharing, and mostly refrain from the sort of design tourism that have defined (and continue to define) many "socially responsible" design projects. (Some day someone will curate an amazing show called "Socially Irresponsible Design," but I digress.)

The exhibition couldn't come at a more opportune time. The challenges faced by rapidly growing cities are huge and the number of people destined to be affected by them is massive: almost one billion people live in informal settlements, better known as slums, worldwide. That number is project to double by 2030, and by that time, all less economically developed countries will have more people living in cities than in rural villages. Exhibited projects engage directly with these challenges. Some, like architect Luyanda Mpahlwa's 10x10 Sandbag House, strike me as extremely successful: costing just 50,000 rand, or \$7,000, the design borrows from indigenous mud and wattle building methods, and actually feels very much in character with its community. Another smart solution is the Community Cooker in Kibera, Kenya, created by architects James

Howard Archer and Mumo Musava. A far safer alternative than Kenya's typical use of wood and charcoal cooking fires (which cause respiratory diseases and environmental degradation), this communal oven not only helps eliminate those risks, it also runs on trash, thus reducing a significant waste management problem the community had been experiencing. The Community Cooker not only makes people (let's not call them "users") safer, it promotes social exchange and entrepreneurship within communities.



Residents prepare meals at the Kibera informal settlements' Community Cooker in Kenya. Courtesy Community Cooker/Jiko Ya Jamii

Approaches to socially responsible design (aka design for social impact, aka transformative design, et al) have changed dramatically since architect Rem Koolhaas breathlessly extolled the virtues of Lagos, Nigeria's chaotic beauty. Koolhaas was less

interested in solving that city's dire challenges than he was in celebrating its dynamism. Among the jaw-dropping observations in his 2006 documentary, *Lagos: Wide & Close*, were ones like this: "The city has these unbelievable — you can only call it abstract — compositions. Red turning into white turning into black. You've never seen geometry at that scale in the world."

This abstract art aspect is perhaps less interesting for the residents of Lagos who face very real, non-aesthetic challenges on a daily basis. And post-*Wide & Close*, many architects and designers veered too far to the opposite end of the spectrum, dropping into places like Lagos with the belief that they could quickly "fix" them. There were problems with that approach as well, of course. You need to do more than walk a mile in someone's shoes in order to understand and improve upon their station.



In Bangkok, Thailand, images of the Bang Bua Canal Community Upgrading before, above, and after, below. Courtesy ACHR



With this exhibit, the Cooper-Hewitt, like many designers working in this space, has learned from past mistakes—its own and those of others working the field. For example, the "prequel" of sorts to "Design *with* the Other 90%: Cities" was titled "Design *for* the Other 90%," and that seemingly subtle shift from "for" to "with" is not at all inconsequential. As Bogota-born designer and writer Carolina Vallejo pointed out in her provocative NYU thesis project and subsequent competition cheekily called *Design for the First World*, there's a whole lot of "paternalistic let's produce unnecessary crap and throw it out there projects" (she points to *One Laptop Per Child* as a particularly egregious example) created by designers for—and not in collaboration with—the communities they intend to serve. "Design *With* the Other 90%" focuses more about how designers can develop solutions with communities and in so doing, critiques previous and still-prevalent tendencies to drop in and "fix" what ails them. Cooper Hewitt has smartly avoided showcasing a lot of this kind of stuff, as they did in 2007, in favor of more systemic solutions such as the ingenious bus rapid-transit system in Guangzhou. I do wish the exhibit had included

a few domestic projects: our American urban condition—not to mention or social, economic, and political ones—has more than its share of dysfunction, too.



The Guangzhou bus rapid-transit system, before and after. Courtesy Institute for Transportation & Development Policy/Karl Fjellstrom

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