

World-traveling show draws urban design in 10 lines

Exhibitions

By John Gendall

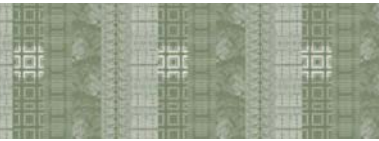
X Lines Curated by Joan Busquets with Felipe Correa. Originated at Harvard GSD, December 2005; Quito Architectural Biennale, November 2006; Tshingua University, Beijing, fall 2007.

Urban Design, a term coined at the Harvard Graduate School of Design (GSD) in the mid-1950s, is the tenuously defined profession consigned to the blurred zone where architecture, landscape architecture, and city planning overlap. Practiced mostly in seminar rooms of prestigious universities, it is still staking out its territory as a stand-alone field. The Fall 2006/Winter 2007 issue of the *Harvard Design Magazine (HDM)*, presents a conversation among nine preeminent designers, academics, and writers on a question urban designers should find pressing: "What is Urban Design?" This query follows an essay by Michael Sorkin in the same issue of *HDM*, in which he begins by announcing, "Urban Design has reached a dead end."

Adding to the uncertainties of the discipline's objectives and professional parameters is the fact that its focus—the city—has undergone

changes sufficient to challenge even the most entrenched field of study and practice. In recent years, cities have swelled at unprecedented rates, forcing a reconsideration of urban strategies.

In the midst of these discussions comes the beautifully executed exhibition, *X Lines: A New Lens for the Urbanistic Project*, curated by GSD professor Joan Busquets, a Barcelona-based architect, in collaboration with GSD design critic Felipe Correa. Presenting 10 different methods of carrying out urban design, *X Lines* (with its X referring to the Roman numeral 10) sets out to articulate and perhaps justify this field of investigation. What Sorkin pronounced dead, Busquets and Correa rush in to resuscitate. Sorkin argues that the discipline, overcome with nostalgia, lacks the ideological underpinnings and methodological means to engage cities constructively and imaginatively. While consciously omitting the term Urban Design from the entire show, in favor of "Urbanistic Project," Busquets and Correa offer



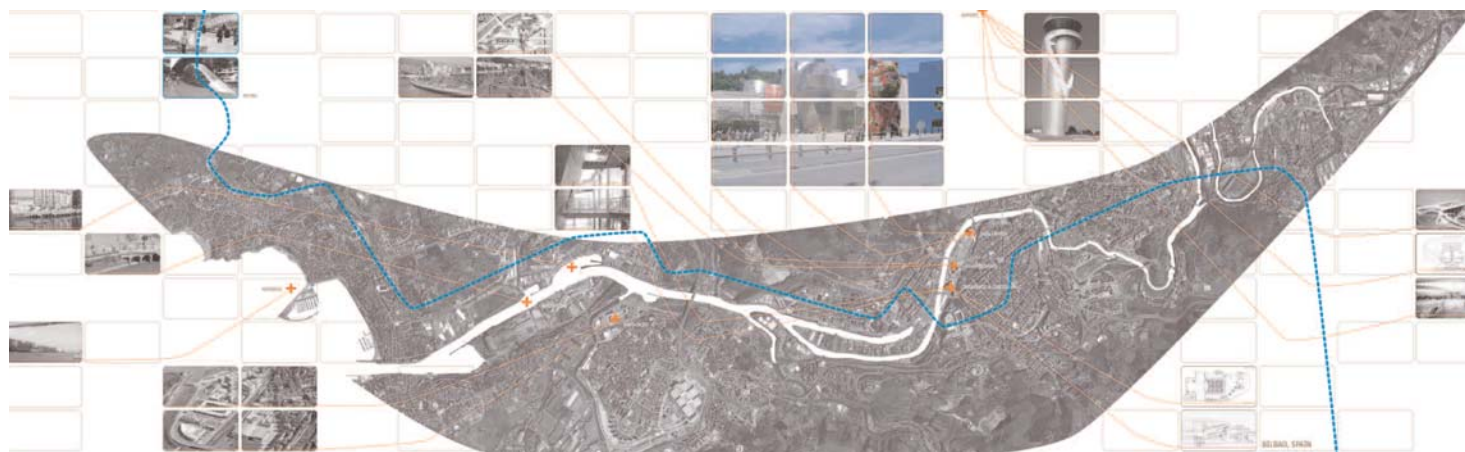
The Quito Biennale showed *X Lines* (below). A mapping of Bilbao analyzed the urban effects of Gehry's building (bottom). "Wallpaper," abstracting urban conditions, runs through the show (left).

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myriad examples of how Urban Design is both constructive and imaginative. They envision *X Lines* as a point of departure for designers considering urban interventions and as an infusion into the ongoing dialogue about the discipline's direction.

Dividing the show into methodological categories, the curators identify the following 10 different "lines," or project types, which they appropriate as examples of "Urbanistic Projects": 1) Synthetic Gestures: construction of an iconic

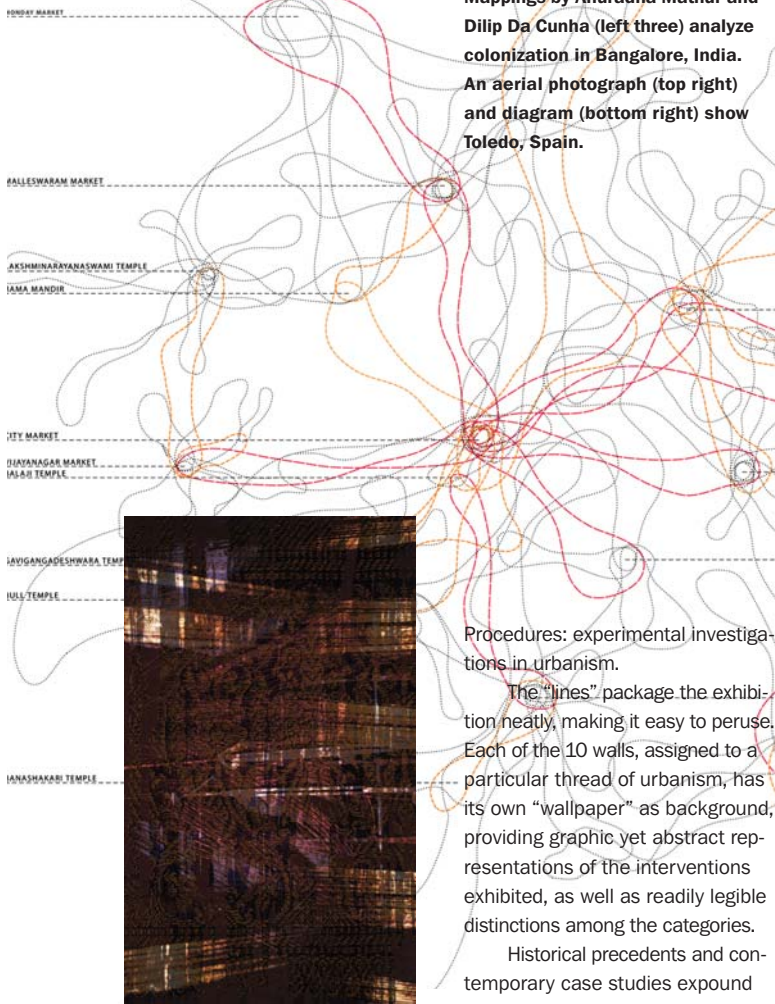
building; 2) Multiplied Grounds: creation of multilevel layers of urban fabric; 3) Tactical Maneuvers: minimalist interventions; 4) Reconfigured Surfaces: restructuring of open space; 5) Piecemeal Aggregations: intermediate urban fragments; 6) Traditional Views: New Urbanism; 7) Recycled Territories: decentralization; 8) Core Retrofitting: updating of historic cores; 9) Analog Compositions: projects that defy master plans; and 10) Speculative



PHOTOGRAPHY: COURTESY OF HARVARD GRADUATE SCHOOL OF DESIGN

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Mappings by Anuradha Mathur and Dilip Da Cunha (left three) analyze colonization in Bangalore, India. An aerial photograph (top right) and diagram (bottom right) show Toledo, Spain.



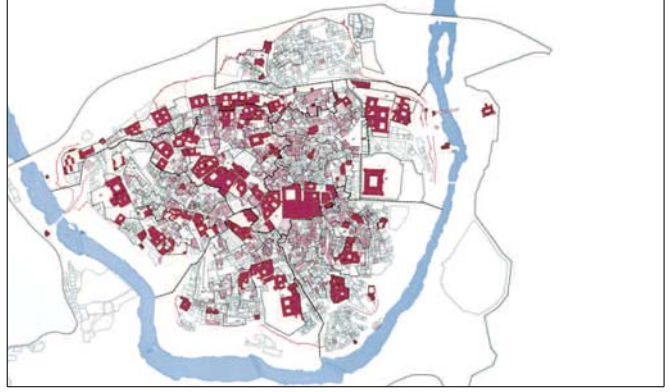
Procedures: experimental investigations in urbanism.

The “lines” package the exhibition neatly, making it easy to peruse. Each of the 10 walls, assigned to a particular thread of urbanism, has its own “wallpaper” as background, providing graphic yet abstract representations of the interventions exhibited, as well as readily legible distinctions among the categories.

Historical precedents and contemporary case studies expound on each approach. With Synthetic Gestures, the curators look at iconic buildings that, they contend, initiate comprehensive strategies for restructuring entire cities and regions. This category analyzes projects that are often brushed off as merely formal manifestations of star architects’ egos.

Frank Gehry’s Guggenheim, in Bilbao, the perennial example, springs to the top of the list. Mappings by landscape architect Gonzalo V. Cruz reveal the building’s effects on the city’s waterfront, transportation systems, and harbors. Toyo Ito’s Sendai Mediatheque and Peter Cook and Colin Fournier’s Kunsthau Graz offer further examples of urban catalysts.

Another category, the seventh “line,” Recycled Territories, addresses



urban interventions outside of the consolidated city. Citing New York’s Fresh Kills, and the Bordeaux riverfront and Caen Industrial Park, in France, the curators also turn considerable attention to Anuradha Mathur and Dilip Da Cunha’s mappings of India’s Bangalore territory, demonstrating the role of colonization on that region’s urban areas.

Mathur and Da Cunha’s stunning research highlights one of the show’s greatest virtues and unstated objectives: to reveal and test the limits of the methods of representation used in design disciplines (and, by appropriation, in Urban Design). Replete with magisterial drawings, diagrams, and maps, the exhibition offers a rich spectrum of architectural research. Analytical essays by Busquets and Correa in the accompanying catalog ground the work in terms of urban significance.

Far from definitive, however, the “lines” impose arbitrary distinctions on urban conditions. The curators acknowledge that they could have delineated seven or, for that matter, 29 lines, with some projects falling into any number of different categories. But even with that acknowledgment, the attempt

to define an amorphous profession by herding different techniques into quasi-arbitrary categories is of debatable value. The curators do well to highlight examples of successful projects, which they interpret urbanistically, reminding designers that buildings and landscapes have implications extending far beyond the particular sites.

In the end, viewers are left with a stimulating collection of visual analyses of urban scenarios, some predictable, some surprising, all beautifully represented, and grouped with others that appear at least superficially akin (if not always more profoundly related).

With this exhibition, as with ongoing discussions at design schools, people may still be left wondering, “What is Urban Design?” And such questioning may be the show’s greatest contribution. By reframing the discipline into categories, the curators open the formulation of Urban Design to a new scope of possibilities. Even for a field that has comfortably enjoyed more than 50 years of self-reflection in classrooms and journals, this opportunity for yet more debate places it in more tangible terms than before. ■

PHOTOGRAPHY: COURTESY MUNICIPALITY OF TOLEDO (RIGHT TWO); ANURADHA MATHUR AND DILIP DA CUNHA (LEFT THREE).