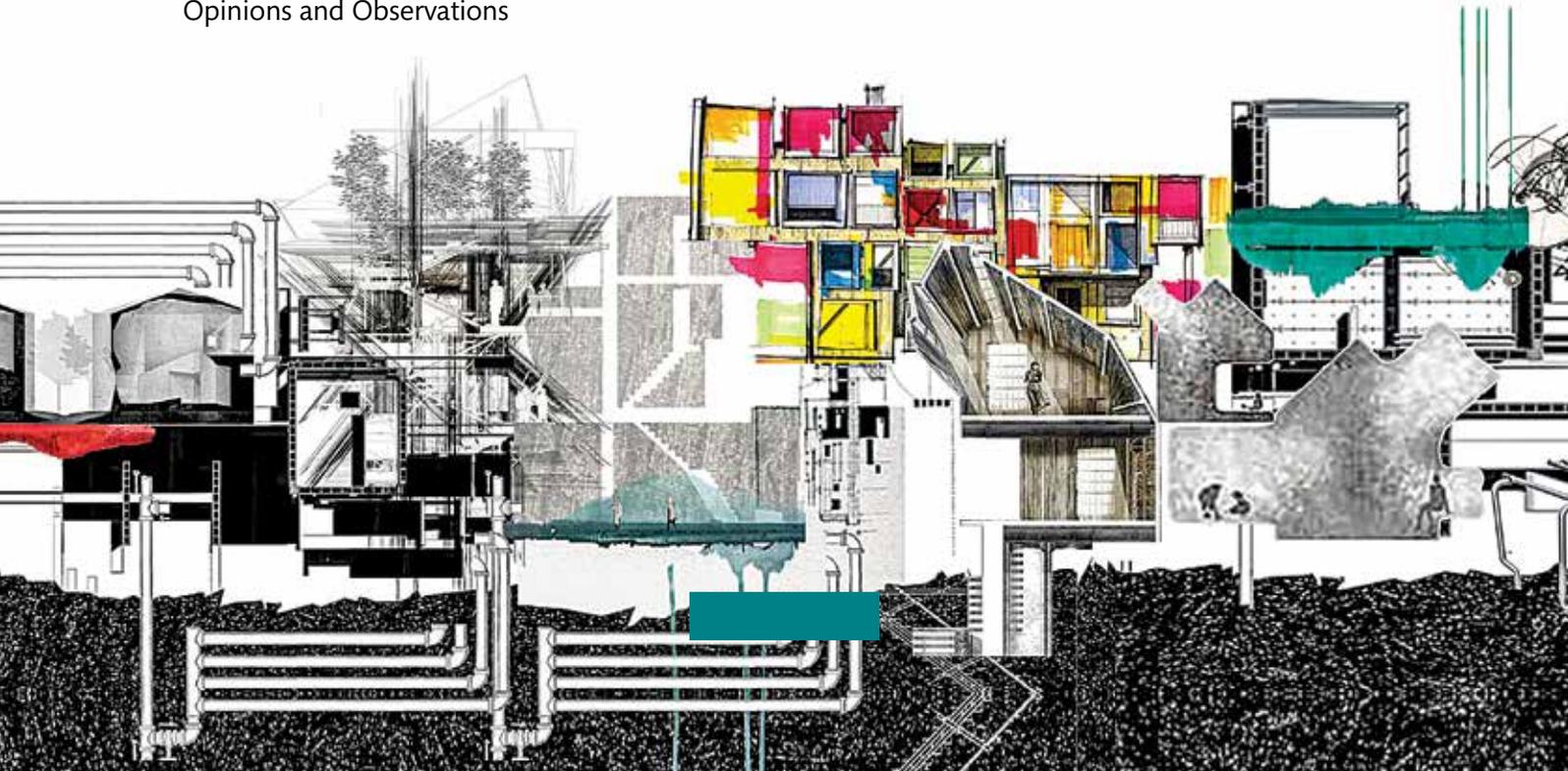


UNSTRUCTURED

Opinions and Observations



Uneven Growth: Tactical Urbanisms for Expanding Megacities

Museum of Modern Art, New York

Through May 10, 2015

Few would question that this exhibition has its heart in the right place. A collection of six very different studies for six very different “megacities”—Mumbai, India; Hong Kong; New York City; Lagos, Nigeria; Rio de Janeiro; and Istanbul—the schemes each respond to some aspect of the unbalanced economic distribution that has characterized urban growth in recent decades. Dense with infographics, broad statistics, and ambitious statements, the show aims to be both encompassing in its global reach and precise in its responses.

As part of MoMA’s “Issues in Contemporary Architecture,” the curators asked six architect teams to create projects for these cities. Like the shows that preceded it in the series—*Rising Currents* in 2009 and *Foreclosed* in 2011—the success or failure of the exhibition is that of the commissioned projects. But unlike the

exhibitions that preceded it, *Uneven Growth* is an overly broad prompt. While the curators acknowledge these varying contexts, one has to question whether Hong Kong and New York City belong alongside Mumbai and Rio de Janeiro, since the political, economic, and historical pressures in each city trigger such vastly divergent responses—a whimsical utopian scheme in Hong Kong, an examination of housing policy in New York City, a resourceful small construction in Mumbai, and a catalog of improvised construction methods from Rio de Janeiro.

Although these projects are each earnest engagements, they don’t make much sense together. Certain issues reappear in several projects—centrally, the problem of the finance and construction of housing for poor and middle-class residents—but the overall

effect is disjointed. Certain responses are modest and emulate (or fetishize) “bottom-up and informal” techniques; other projects attempt to reprocess massive structures of growth and development. Overall lessons are hard to come by because each city presents a unique array of challenges. *Uneven Growth* is, well, uneven and would have done well to narrow its global ambitions.

ALEKSANDR BIERIG is a PhD student at the Graduate School of Design at Harvard University.

ABOVE

URBZ, a research collective in India, worked with Ensemble Studio (Spain) and MIT-POP lab (Massachusetts) to envision Mumbai’s live-work and public infrastructures moving upward to relieve pressure on the land. Courtesy: MoMA

GENIUS LOCI

F is for Franklin Street

Boston is a city that leaves clues to its past as much as it may preserve it. They make detectives of passersby, partners in the search for the stories that buildings, pavements, and names wait to share.

Such is the curve of Franklin Street in the heart of the Financial District. Seen from Washington Street, past the steel form of Millennium Tower taking shape behind the old Filene's façade, Franklin Street reads as slightly ungainly, a pot-bellied spread of asphalt flanked by undistinguished storefronts. The clues start here.

The curve itself tells of Charles Bulfinch, architect, planner, and selectman. He laid it out in 1794 for the Tontine Crescent, a development inspired by visits to London and Bath a decade earlier. The ellipse of 16 townhouses on the southern side of the street featured an arcaded central element, where he offered space to two nascent civic organizations: the Massachusetts Library Society and Massachusetts Historical Society. (A related clue can be found nearby on City Hall Avenue, off School Street. There, the central element of the Tontine Crescent was replicated in the 1930 façade of Kirstein Business Library, now closed and in disrepair.)

The crescent stood across a landscaped garden from eight semi-detached residences Bulfinch designed on Franklin Place, which he named to honor Benjamin Franklin, who was born nearby. At the center of the garden stood a marble urn etched with Franklin's name. Bulfinch considered the Tontine Crescent his architectural masterpiece, but a volatile economy, balky investors, and massive cost overruns made it his financial ruin. The houses were demolished in 1858 for redevelopment. Had they not been, they would have met the fate of their successors in 1872, when Boston's Great Fire leveled 60 acres of the Financial District.

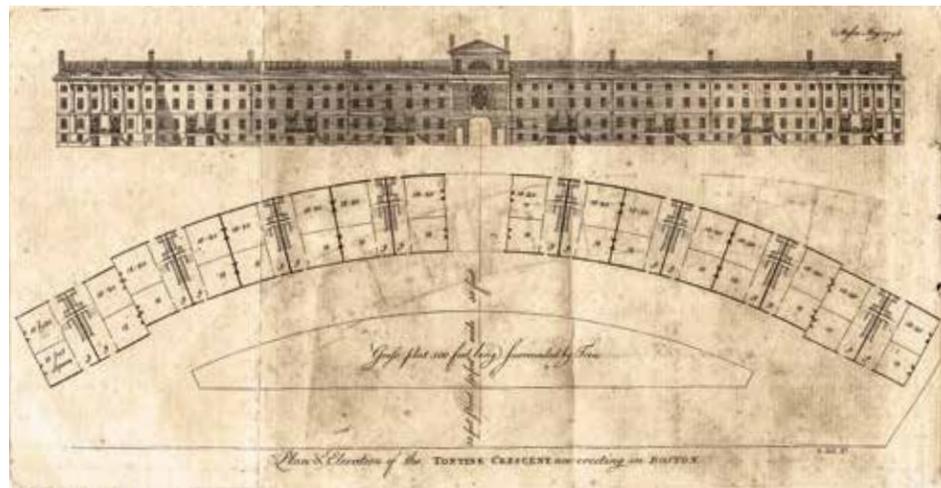
Other clues: the name of Arch Street, which passed beneath the Crescent's central arch to connect Bulfinch's development to Summer Street, and a fading plaque and photograph at the corner of Franklin and Hawley streets.

Bulfinch's ambitions for shaping a new Boston reached beyond residential development. Following the repeal of the Puritan ban on theater in 1792, he drew up plans for the Boston Theatre at the northwest corner of Franklin and Federal streets. After the building burned in 1798, Bulfinch designed its successor. Across from the theater site, a bronze plaque at Number 75 marks the spot of Holy Cross, Boston's first Catholic Church, which he designed

in 1803. He lived to witness the demolition of many of his buildings but was spared learning the fate of the Tontine Crescent. His children salvaged the urn he had dedicated to Franklin and placed it over their father's grave at Mount Auburn Cemetery.

Franklin Street is also home to younger ghosts. In 1934 Hatch Shell architect Richard Shaw designed a slim Art Deco chapel, now closed, at Number 49. Its heavy glass-inset aluminum doors have been replaced with a more practical entrance for the restaurant that now occupies the space, and the ecclesiastical motif above the door is hidden beneath its sign. Inside, the honeycombed ceiling is one of the only remaining original design elements.

Political ghosts linger as well. Deep in the bowels of the old Boston Safe Deposit and Trust at Number 100, Mayor John Collins met regularly with his brain trust in the 1960s, leading efforts to forge his own vision for a "New Boston." Officially termed The Coordinating Committee, the group's meeting place gave them the enduring nickname "The Vault."



TERRI EVANS is the communications manager of Shepley Bulfinch and leads architectural walking tours for Boston By Foot.

ABOVE

Plan and elevation of the Tontine Crescent, Boston, in 1796, engraved by Samuel Hill. Photo: Boston Athenæum

MATTER OF COURSE

Reimagining the Government Service Center

To many Bostonians, Paul Rudolph's monumental and monolithic Government Service Center (GSC) is "that weird parking garage on Beacon Hill," or "the concrete eyesore up the street from Mass General." Occupying a curved-triangle block bounded by Cambridge, New Chardon, Merrimac, and Staniford streets in downtown Boston, the center has been a controversial site almost since the day it opened in 1971. A classic Brutalist redoubt, it was supposed to include a tubular, futuristic office tower, which was never funded by the state.

Still home to the Erich Lindemann Mental Health Center and the state's Department of Unemployment Assistance, the GSC is now an urban disaster area. The tiered concrete plaza that Rudolph hoped would be an oasis for lunch-breaking bureaucrats is now cocooned in chain-link fencing and barbed wire intended to deter the city's homeless from camping there. "It is an underutilized and sad corner of the city," says Mark Pasnik, a founding principal of over,under and a professor of architecture at Wentworth Institute of Technology—this from a man who *likes* the site. "I think these buildings are troubled but are also really interesting. They represent the heroic imagination of a previous generation, and they need care and transformation."

Pasnik and his Wentworth colleague Carol Burns, of Taylor & Burns Architects, devoted a semester to brainstorming

alternative uses, or dynamic readaptations, of Rudolph's aging GSC. In a course they labeled EPIC—externally-collaborative, project-based, interdisciplinary curricula—they invited interior designers from Wentworth, landscape architects from Northeastern University, and officials from the state's Division of Capital Asset Management to meet with their class of 27 students to dream up new "programs" for the Service Center.

I attended Pasnik and Burns's end-of-semester review, when student teams presented seven proposals for reworking the GSC to eight guest architects. The concepts varied widely. One team simply treated the site as a commercial development opportunity, breaking up the low, linked structure into four buildings with greater floor-to-area ratios that match the high-rises now surrounding the site. Another tried to exploit the site for tourism, replacing the center's parking garage with a Boston History Museum, surrounded by mixed-use towers of office space, residences, and a hotel.

Tagging along behind three of the feistier reviewers—David Eisen, Mark Klopfer, and Jim McNeely—I heard three of the seven presentations. As the project architect for the Lindemann center, McNeely was a rich addition to the critical mix. The original program for the mental health building "was written by a bunch of psychiatrists for whom money was no object," he recalled. It had a swimming pool, a chapel, electrical and



plumbing workshops for occupational therapy, coffee shops, and a theater. “They thought the state would cough up the money to maintain it, which it didn’t,” he said.

I found myself most involved in “Against Impenetrability,” a three-student initiative to open up the fortress-like structure to the outside world. “Right now, the public doesn’t know how to use the building or what’s inside it,” said team member Kaz Cunningham. Among the solutions proposed was to open up the building on its north-south axis, creating a hypothetical flow of pedestrians from North Station up and down Beacon Hill to government office buildings, to the medical centers, and to the Financial District.

The trio showed an elegant rendering of the building’s north-facing “urban passageway” lifted onto slender pilotis, allowing a sightline from Merrimac Street straight up the hill to Cambridge Street. In an early sketch, the students built geodesic overlays onto Rudolph’s forbidding entrances, only a few of which remain in use. “What happened to those Buckminster Fuller entrances?” McNeely quizzed the students. “Easier to draw than to build?”

Klopfert pointed out that one proposed passageway through the site blissfully ignored new construction that had sprung up since Rudolph’s time. “You come through here,” he said, pointing at a drawing, “but where do you end up? At the blank side of a Graham Gund building.” The students hadn’t integrated One Bowdoin Square, Gund’s low-rise that abuts the Rudolph site, into their plans.

Noting that a student had placed an uncovered hotel entrance away from the street, Klopfert noted a practical problem: “People get out of the cab from Logan, in the rain; they don’t want to walk to the hotel entrance,” he said. “It can’t be there.”

I asked Greg Gibson, a student member of the “Impenetrability” team, what he thought of Rudolph’s Services Center after spending a whole semester working on it. “I like the building even though I know it’s unpopular,” he said. “It’s a byproduct of Rudolph’s ideas. He thinks on a higher level than most individuals, and it’s hard to appreciate that.”

You’ve drunk the Kool-Aid, I suggested. What about all that massed concrete? “Concrete has qualities that are pretty harsh,” Gibson replied. “But you have to accept that as a byproduct of this great work.”

ALEX BEAM writes a column for *The Boston Globe* and is working on a book about Vladimir Nabokov. “Matter of course” visits exceptional architecture classes at New England schools.

LEFT

Student work from the Wentworth seminar included renderings by Sara Zettler and Jared Guilmett (left) and Matt Arsenault (right).



AHEAD

Drawing Ambience: Alvin Boyarsky and the Architectural Association

The Rhode Island School of Design Museum, Providence

April 24–August 2, 2015

One of the most influential figures in 20th-century design education, Alvin Boyarsky championed architecture as an artistic venture, a wide-ranging practice that is as much about drawing and publication as it is about design and construction. During his tenure as chairman of the Architectural Association in London (1971 to 1990), Boyarsky orchestrated an exhibition and publication program that situated drawing as a form of architecture in its own right. The RISD show highlights the impressive collection he assembled: drawings by Frank Gehry, Zaha Hadid, Rem Koolhaas, and Daniel Libeskind, and folios representing the work of Peter Cook, Peter Eisenman, Coop Himmelblau, and Kisa Kawakami, among others. Together, they explore the techniques and spirit of drawing practices that permeated this time of experimentation in architecture worldwide.

ABOVE

Bash, by Eduardo Paolozzi, uses material from mass media and pop culture to create a collage, 1971. © Eduardo Paolozzi.

From the Collection of the Alvin Boyarsky Archive.

5 QUESTIONS

Feeding the soul

Julie Burros is Boston's chief of arts and culture, a position recently created by Mayor Martin Walsh. Formerly the director of cultural planning for the city of Chicago and trained as an urban planner, she provided assistance to cultural organizations focused on strategic growth. Her first initiative in Boston is to lead the creation of a cultural plan.

What is your favorite spot in Boston?

One thing I appreciate that is uniquely Boston—it lacks a grid. I walk around trying to navigate, and there is confusion: Streets change names halfway through. You catch a little glimpse of that. There are cobblestones and little lanes. There is a great sense of how everything looks and fits together. I am delighting in the feeling of a city that isn't driven by a grid.

How does investment in arts and culture benefit Boston as a whole?

It's very different from investing in hedge funds or other economic mechanisms—

it will benefit Boston in multifaceted ways. Research on the impact of funding for artists and arts organizations [shows] a positive impact on tourism and economic development, creative industries and education, the general culture of innovation in the city. One of the most important benefits is that it helps seed the ecosystem—arts and culture is the stuff that feeds people's souls.

What elements are crucial to a successful cultural plan?

Assessment and analysis of what conditions exist in the landscape and the field. It also requires public and stakeholder engagement, which is the cornerstone of any cultural planning process. Then, there is a synthesis—pulling things together that reflect the goals of the people of Boston, the cultural community as well as the administration. Mayor Walsh has talked about wanting to make Boston

a municipal arts leader. That's a complex goal, but by establishing my role and initiating the plan, the mayor is creating greater visibility and beginning to put the proper resources in place.

How can the design community support your cultural planning efforts?

By being receptive to an interdisciplinary approach that embraces the role of arts and culture in the everyday lives of people and their experience of the civic realm. The ultimate collaborative approach would be to have artists on design teams at the earlier stages of all kinds of civic projects and public works. That is my dream. Beyond creating, say, a mosaic within a train station, maybe the artist on a transit project could be a dancer who is well versed on how to move people in the best possible ways. I'd ask the design community to remain open-minded, creative, and aspirational about a collaborative, interdisciplinary process.

If you were going to be stuck on a desert island, what piece of art would you take with you?

Here's the thing: If I'm on a desert island, let's just say any island, I'm going to assume that it is a physically beautiful place, so I'm not going to bring a piece of visual art with me. I would bring the collected works of Stephen Sondheim. I've been completely obsessed with it for a little while, listening to Sondheim all the time. I'd bring a solar-powered device so that I could listen to the music. If I had that with me, I don't think I would ever feel alone.

Interviewed by **GINA FORD ASLA**, a principal at Sasaki Associates.

LEFT

Julie Burros in her Boston City Hall office.
Photo: Ryuji Suzuki





SEEN

“The Voke”

Worcester, Massachusetts

Acquainting myself with abandoned historic buildings during moments of silence—before their rebirth—is something I consider a privilege. Oftentimes, it’s as if the contents of these remarkable structures are mindfully aware of the changes about to take place. Ordinary in their day, today they carry special significance: The keys left on a sink. A flag draped over a chair. Elevator gates left slightly ajar. Hatboxes and broken glass. Weighing stations and other machines of commerce rusted and hushed.

And so my work begins, capturing the character and temperament of discarded objects and beautiful decay. The images become storytellers, offering tangible proof of lives who labored, learned, convalesced, or worshiped within these buildings.

At an early age and hand in hand with my father, who made his career preserving architectural heritage, I was encouraged to experience these landmarks firsthand. Worcester Vocational High School was no exception. It was a magical place to photograph. Once bustling with students studying trades such as woodworking and drafting, “the Voke” abounded with signs of its former spirit—graffitied lockers, scattered tools, magnificent machinery. Having inherited my father’s love of old things, I turn my attention and camera to artifacts that have been discarded but by no means overlooked.

MARIA VERRIER is a photographer based in Concord, Massachusetts.

ABOVE

Photo: Maria Verrier

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