

UNSTRUCTURED

Opinions and Observations



HOT TO COLD: an odyssey of architectural adaptation

National Building Museum, Washington, DC

Through August 30

As a species, humans adapt and evolve to survive our surroundings. Whether in anthropology or architecture, the adage holds true. It's architectural adaptation that takes the stage in this exhibition, an ode to the much-buzzed-about Bjarke Ingels Group (BIG).

This adaptive nature has allowed us to colonize some of the harshest corners of Earth, and BIG has designed structures in many of them. Walking around the museum's atrium, one journeys from the deserts of Qatar to Finland's frigid tundra. More than 60 models of projects in varied climates perch between the arches of the museum's second level. Panels with photos, diagrams, and commentary from Ingels supplement each model, providing a window into BIG's rationale behind each design.

Naturally, the more extreme the climate, the more climatic concerns factor into the design. In temperate areas, politics and culture are greater factors in molding the structures.

Following the 800-foot walkabout, visitors walk into a gallery screening short films about some of BIG's completed projects. Entering the space feels a bit like being thrown into an independent European film: One isn't entirely sure what's going on, but there's mood lighting, and it seems mildly intriguing. Seated on chairs or benches unique to each site, viewers can experience the Danish Expo Pavilion from the vantage point of a skateboard, or explore the Gammel Hellerup Gymnasium through parkour.

The concept of adaptation is plastered all over the exhibit. But another key to ancient humans' success was the ability to use resources to their advantage. BIG champions sustainability and stewardship in the displays, but the question of how the environment will adapt to us looms large over their architectural jungles and man-made ecosystems.

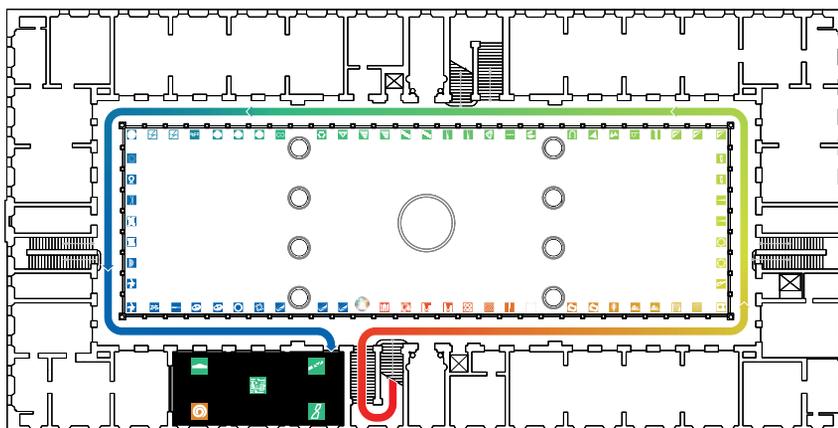
HELEN THOMPSON is a freelance writer based in Washington, DC.

ABOVE

HOT TO COLD installation at the National Building Museum. Photo: Matt Carbone

LEFT

HOT TO COLD main concept diagram. Courtesy BIG



**SEEN****The BMW Museum**

Munich

On a trip to Munich last year, I was mesmerized by this building, with its abstract shapes and light that seemed to veer dangerously off glass and slick steel. My eyes traced its beautiful modern lines over and over, searching for a way to capture its intensity. After walking the perimeter several times, I knew one or two images would not be enough; I needed to create a graphic-studies portfolio of the museum's playful visual maze.

Focusing on the basic elements of art—line, shape, form, texture—I found perspectives that allowed those details to interact dynamically. I looked for the repetition of geometric shapes and compression of forms to create a confusion of depth and scale in my compositions. While printing the photographs in the darkroom, I concentrated on the gradation of tones to re-create the feeling of the natural light bouncing off the contemporary structure.

In *Building Study 3*, the planes overlap one another in a way that makes you question which way is up and which is down. The negative space of the sky on the left becomes another shape that engages the viewer's eye and continues the tetris feeling of the architecture. The repetition of triangles and lines throughout the composition creates a push-and-pull effect that some might find disorienting, a reaction that tests our expectations.

ELIZABETH ELLENWOOD is a fine-art photographer based in Boston.

ABOVE

Photo: Elizabeth Ellenwood

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Everything is Design: The Work of Paul Rand

Museum of the City of New York

Through July 19

In his 1965 essay “Design and the Play Instinct,” graphic designer Paul Rand discussed his approach to teaching design: Give students a clear problem. “A problem with defined limits, implied or stated disciplines which are, in turn, conducive to the instinct of play, will most likely yield an interested student, and very often, a novel solution,” wrote Rand. The creators of *Everything Is Design*, an exhibition celebrating Rand’s career at the Museum of the City of New York, seem to have taken the designer’s words to heart.

The one-room show appears small and restrained, both in its gridlike layout and minimal commentary. However, those who invest the time to simply stop and look not only will be delighted but also may even laugh out loud. Pithy Rand quotations hover in the visitor’s field of vision, emblazoned at hip height along the bases of the vitrines. Divided into thematic sections that reflect Rand’s professional trajectory, the material on display includes advertising, book design, and ephemera from his years on the faculty at Yale. But what dominates, despite the even hand of curator Donald Albrecht, is the corporate brand work for which Rand is most famous.

IBM, one of the exhibition’s major sponsors, looms large. In 1956 Rand was recruited by IBM’s lead design consultant, Eliot Noyes, to join Eero Saarinen and Charles and Ray Eames on a creative dream team that was given the widest imaginable latitude by then-IBM president Thomas Watson, Jr. Their mandate was a tip-toe reimagining of the company’s image. It was during this time that Rand, who shared with the architects a Modernist approach rooted in Bauhaus principles, produced the striped IBM logo still in use today. A sidebar display reveals Rand’s concurrent doodles of a jailbird in a black and white-striped prisoner uniform. In a deceptively regimented exhibition, Rand’s empathy, humor, and childlike sense of play shine through.

MOLLY HEINTZ, managing director and cofounder of the editorial consultancy Superscript, is an editor at Co.Design, the online design and business section of *Fast Company* magazine.

ABOVE

Book jacket for *The Dada Painters and Poets* by Robert Motherwell (left) and *Jazzways* magazine, Volume 1, 1946, with cover design by Paul Rand; from private collections.

MATTER OF COURSE

Roman Architecture

Loath as I am to leave my house, I wondered: Could I take an architecture course without leaving my laptop, thanks to the brave new world of online education?

Not surprisingly, the answer is yes. Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), which purports to have the oldest architecture department among American universities, has been offering OpenCourseWare classes for some time, as has EdX, the much-ballyhooed Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) collaboration between Harvard and MIT, launched three years ago.

Yale entered the online game a few years ago, and I audited what felt like a New Haven classic, Professor Diana Kleiner’s “Roman Architecture,” initially webcast by Open Yale Courses and now available through Coursera. I rode for free, as it were. You can also take the course for “credit,” in the form of a Verified Certificate from Coursera, at a cost of about \$50.

How was the class? I enjoyed it quite a bit. It’s a classic undergraduate lecture course, the kind you find at almost any decent college or university. Sure, there was some pandering, which makes it a popular course. Kleiner argues that the Romans invented the modern shopping mall (i.e., Trajan’s multilevel market building), and the fast-food joint, in the form of the beautifully preserved *thermopolium* at Pompei. Yes, the class prepares you for high-level cocktail conversation. (And, indeed, some people use the Coursera course as a sort of video guidebook before visiting Rome.) But it’s serious in purpose. If you want an introduction to the professions of archaeology, classics, and art history, this is an excellent place to start.

Kleiner is engaging and has been engaged with the material all her life. It wasn’t uncommon to see slides of her as a younger woman posing on the paving stones of Pompei, or atop a crocodile statue at Hadrian’s Villa Adriana. Even better, she has opinions, which make for great classroom fodder. A Kleiner-ism that I heard more than once: “I know I’m biased, but I think the Pantheon is the greatest building ever conceived by man.”

That inevitably generated a teaching moment, in the form of a near-endless discussion thread titled “Is Professor Kleiner right about the Pantheon?” Weighing in from all over the world, students nominated many other buildings for “greatest ever” status, among them the Sydney Opera House, Hagia Sophia, Taj Mahal, and so on.

A student named Joe Rosenthal from northern California studied the Pantheon in considerable detail and demonstrated to the rest of us the non sphericity of the famous dome, a detail that certainly would have eluded me. He posted an online photo of a small, carved walnut Pantheon replica that he sent to Kleiner at Yale. Gift received; “I do indeed treasure Joe’s Pantheon!” she wrote in the online forum, not the one below Palatine Hill. (Sorry, I couldn’t resist.)

That’s one way an online course differs from shuffling

dutifully into a poorly heated lecture hall. Here's another way: Class is always in session. I attended most lectures during the worst moments of Boston's February ice jams, and of course it was quite soothing to arrange myself just so, in an IKEA chair within range of a functional space heater, and fill my brain with . . . concrete.

If you are reading this magazine, you are probably familiar with the design/build dichotomy of the ancient world: The Greeks excelled in design, and the Romans mastered construction. The Romans delighted in stealing Temples of Jupiter and rechristening them Temples of Zeus—and building them to last. Speaking of rechristening, I learned that the nave of Rome's famous Church of Santa Maria degli Angeli used to be the *frigidarium* (cold pool) of the Baths of Diocletian. There was a lot of that kind of thing going on.

Yes, I learned a fair amount about concrete, from its early use in *opus incertum* ("uncertain work") to the lighter, stronger remix that substituted tufa and pumice stones for the earlier, heavy rubble base.

We owe this breakthrough—"no small accomplishment"—to the emperor Caligula, Kleiner informed us. Who would have thought? Hadrian was also a practicing architect who probably deserved credit, or partial credit, for many of the masterpieces attributed to him, for instance, his magnificent mausoleum, elegantly repurposed as the Castel Sant'Angelo,

which towers above the Tiber due east of Vatican City.

Kleiner says she visits the online class site every day—the classes were prerecorded in a Yale lecture hall—and generally enjoys the MOOC experience. She's a bona fide evangelist, having worked in online education for 15 years. Although she is guarded on the subject of finances, she allowed that the architecture lectures, initially financed by a Hewlett Foundation grant, are "revenue neutral" for Yale. "It's not clear whether the university will ever get income from this kind of thing in a serious way," she said.

"I love face-to-face education," Kleiner said. "Being able to interact with students in my lecture course is extraordinarily exciting. I was initially skeptical about Coursera, but it has worked out better than I thought it would. The forum discussions are better than at Yale because people are putting more time into them. It's a lot of extra work, but I take it very seriously."

I, too, was initially skeptical about Coursera. It worked out better than I thought it would.

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.

BELOW

Inside Trajan's Forum, Museo dei Fori Imperiali, Rome. Photo: Carole Raddato



5 QUESTIONS

Rosanne Somerson

Forty years after graduating from the Rhode Island School of Design with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in industrial design, Somerson was named the school's 17th president in February. In 1985 she was hired to run the graduate furniture concentration in the industrial design department; a decade later she helped to found the school's furniture design program. Her work has been displayed in the Smithsonian American Art Museum, the Fuller Craft Museum, Yale University Art Gallery, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, among others.

You've said that RISD's immersive, studio-based educational approach might shape the future. How so?

We're living in a time of great change. The competencies gained from studio-immersive learning help students and alumni achieve tangible outcomes not necessarily easily attained in a different model. Hands are very intelligent, and when the mind is cooperating with

the hands and all of the senses, a new kind of knowledge can result. Design is so much about humans, and the studio-based model brings together the natural instincts, talents, and capacities of the human body. Materials have personality, and when you work with them, they make suggestions to you about what might happen. A student here made a beautiful molded chaise longue out of cork and built inside it a structure of airline ply with ribbing. The chaise longue had compound curves and could float in a pool or sit in a living room.

How do you balance RISD's long-term faculty with your stated desire for new talent?

A balance of philosophy that comes from generational and regional differences makes a robust community. Technology plays a key role in everything we do. I brought new faculty into our foundation studies who are incorporating coding into the first-year curriculum—it's important to write your own programs so you can design and create in the language of coding. Institutions and leadership can benefit from the experience of studio practice. The same conceptual drive is important to apply to leading an arts school. Art and design education is itself a beautiful piece of studio work.

What role can design play in humanitarian and cultural concerns, and can you identify a compelling project that RISD faculty or graduates are involved in?

Designers and artists are able to rethink social systems—we have students working on clean-water projects, redesigning the voting system, healthcare issues. Our recent Solar Decathlon students and alumni formed a team with Brown

University and a university in Erfurt, Germany, and designed a beautiful house made of textiles that's energy positive, the Techstyle Haus. It has this beautiful organic exterior shape and photovoltaic panels that can collect the sun at any angle, a form that could only be achieved through a structural textile. It's now permanently installed in southern France.

What's next for Somerson Studios, the furniture-design practice you established in 1979 in Fall River, Massachusetts?

I'm working with John Dunnigan on a project designing interior dormitory furniture for the Haystack [Mountain School of Crafts] campus in Deer Isle, Maine, a special architectural site designed by Edward Larrabee Barnes.

Tell us about your favorite piece of furniture.

It's the one in my head that I haven't made up yet; I'm developing it in my imagination. I'm influenced by furniture from Egyptian times to the most contemporary pieces—I like most the pieces that shift the way we think of the interaction of the object, pieces that help us see materials and forms. This is a moment for designers like no other time in history. The world needs us to think nimbly and regenerate questions that answer problems with complex solutions. Designers are at the heart of that.



LEFT
Rosanne Somerson in the RISD president's house, Providence. Photo: Jane Beiles



Public by Design: Public Art in the Fenway Cultural District

Massachusetts College of Art and Design

March 19, 2015

How can public art energize a place? Is it important for public art to delight or provoke? Who are we as a community? By exploring those questions, this panel discussion spotlighted the Fenway Alliance’s Public by Design initiative—which aims to bring more public art to the neighborhood—and the role of architect as artist.

For the past three years, temporary, large-scale, site-specific public art installations by architecture firms and their young associates have provided the backdrop to the Alliance’s “Opening our Doors” fall festival. Perkins+Will’s Kim Poliquin launched the effort with *ENfold*, a 2012 installation featuring a luminous fabric ribbon that stretched across Evans Way Park. In 2013, Goody Clancy’s Rachel Hampton led *Interlace*, an interactive piece that asked visitors to weave their thoughts and ideas—literally—into a larger web. Jean Kim of Shepley Bulfinch created 2014’s *Sparkle & Chime*, an elegant and playful piece that encouraged viewers to listen, too. All three let visitors interact with a known place in an unexpected way, inviting participants to play in their city.

What do architects bring to public art-making? There are straightforward benefits, such as familiarity with suppliers and materials, and detailing them for resistance to weather and human activity. Architecture engages multiple people in its making; these pieces offered that opportunity on a compressed timeline. All three architect-led installations danced between individual contributions and larger, collective gestures. Perhaps most profoundly, public art, like architecture, is a vivid act of imagination put into permanent form. Art and beauty and catalytic ideas are introduced to daily routines. Temporary installations bring a snap, a more open attitude toward new approaches. While architects are otherwise slogging through the slow pace of building, these fleeting one-day or one-month pieces offer a chance to energetically move the city forward. Temporary can pave the way for permanent.

GRETCHEN SCHNEIDER RABINKIN AIA is executive director of the Community Design Resource Center of Boston and the Boston Society of Architects’ director of civic design.

ABOVE

ENfold, by Kim Poliquin for Perkins+Will, in the Evans Way Park, Boston.
Photo: J. Horner