



Z-20 Concentrated Solar-Power System. Ezri Tarazi and Ori Levin, Tarazi Studio. Manufacturer and client: ZenithSolar. Israel, 2009. Photo courtesy ZenithSolar.

National Design Triennial: Why Design Now?

Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum, New York City
May 14, 2010–January 9, 2011

The fourth installment of the Cooper-Hewitt's Design Triennial highlights designs that respond to the social and environmental crises of our time. From hand-operated millet threshers made of bicycle parts to solar-powered LED displays to carbon-neutral cities, the exhibition features an impressive array of solutions to contemporary issues.

The challenge of the triennial format is that it necessarily casts a wide net; organization of the resultant “catch” is nearly impossible. Here, the curators opted for eight thematic sections — Energy, Mobility, Community, Materials, Prosperity, Health, Communication, and Simplicity — that are so vague as to become almost meaningless. Although the themes are broad, the conceptual framework for the triennial as a whole is surprisingly limited. The curators are so intent on proving design's relevance that they lose sight of its consummate role, that of giving form to the world around us. Many of the artifacts on display are fascinating in their ingenuity but are far less spectacular as design objects.

Happily, a handful of projects and

products stand out within the jumble. Large-scale models and prototypes offer some of the most satisfying moments. In the Energy section, tiny mirrors across the concave surface of the Z-20 Concentrated Solar-Power System, designed to capture five times the solar energy of a conventional solar cell, transform the space of the gallery. The M10 Kite-Power System's sleek carbon-fiber wing, intended to harness wind power, hangs overhead. Together, the two prototypes offer a powerful testament to such products' potential to reshape our built environment. Under the Community theme is the ambitious plan of Medellín, Colombia, to inject public buildings and landscapes into its most dangerous neighborhoods, spawning a rebirth of those communities. The city — more than any product — stands as convincing evidence of the transformative power of design.

Online: <http://exhibitions.cooperhewitt.org/Why-Design-Now>

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International HarborArts Outdoor Exhibition

Boston Harbor Shipyard

256 Marginal Street, East Boston
www.HarborArts.net

It's a compelling proposition: Use large outdoor art at the spot where land and water meet to bring attention to ocean issues. HarborArts first made a splash with the 40-foot metal cod that floated across Boston Harbor last year. The giant fish now rests on a roof in East Boston's Boston Harbor Shipyard, along with works by more than 30 other artists from around the world, all in free public view.

The Shipyard is one of the last remnants of Boston's true working waterfront. Now it's Boston's newest sculpture garden, too.

The pieces — some beautiful, some wonderfully tactile — tease viewers to look more closely. But because most were not designed for this site — they're on loan from the artists — there is a disconnect between object and place that is at times distracting; the installation doesn't have the visual or intellectual resonance that it might. Yet. With new works rotating in, HarborArts could mature to something extraordinary.

Gretchen Schneider AIA, LEED AP is the principal of Schneider Studio in Boston and lives near the Shipyard.

Apogee by Karl Saliter, 2007.
Photo by Christina Lanzl, UrbanArts.



The Boston Modern Module: National Trust for Historic Preservation

First Church of Boston

June 29–30, 2010

Recent news has not been good for Modern architectural landmarks in Boston. The kindest headline the *Globe* could muster for a recent article on Modern architecture was “In Praise of Ugly Buildings.” Beyond the media, public discourse on Boston’s Moderns remains focused on bad memories of urban renewal and general distaste for concrete.

In June, the National Trust for Historic Preservation hosted a “Modern Module” in hopes of providing a stage for productive debate. Titled “The Spirit of Reinvention,” the module included an invitational roundtable and a public forum accompanied by a booklet with photographs by Bruce Martin and text by David Eisen AIA. Almost 40 people attended the roundtable discussion, while

nearly 300 turned out for the forum — higher numbers than previous Modern Modules in the Twin Cities and LA. However, attendees were primarily design and preservation professionals.

Indeed, the amount of Boston’s professional research on and support for Modern architecture stands out among American cities. While citing the ever-present need for funding, roundtable speakers acknowledged the relatively extensive resources that the Boston area has put into documenting mid-century architecture and supporting building owners.

Nonetheless, a schism remains between professional and public opinion, and both the invitational roundtable and public forum ended with suggestions (if not specific direction) on how to improve public education. Moderator Anthony Flint focused on this issue during the forum discussion featuring Charles Birnbaum of the Cultural Landscape Foundation, David Fixler FAIA of DOCOMOMO New England, Susan Macdonald of the Getty Conservation

Institute, and Kathy Spiegelman of Harvard University’s Allston Development Group. In conclusion, Spiegelman asked the most difficult question: How do we reach those who just “don’t get it”? As she has observed, not even young students could be counted on to advocate for mid-century or contemporary buildings that depart from nostalgic images of the city.

Participants made numerous proposals: high school and university classes on Modernism; storytelling; training for realtors. Most are long-term commitments. Yet the Modern Module also made clear that a dedication to mid-century buildings is increasingly critical as these buildings change owners or begin to require significant maintenance and functional upgrades. As recent proposals for the Christian Science Center demonstrate, even well-loved and well-used Modern masterpieces are vulnerable.

Justin Crane AIA is an architect with Cambridge Seven Associates and co-chair of Common Boston.

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