

Urban Studies

education

As the world grows more complex, designers undertake extracurricular projects to boost understanding of the changing urban environment.

A small band of architecture students from Belgrade is roving the streets of Manhattan shooting digital images of pipes in subway stations, the flow of pedestrians in Midtown, masses of trash bags on curbs, and gaps between buildings. Everything seems to fascinate them as they stream out of the Van Alen Institute on West 22nd Street, where the School of Missing Studies (SMS) has been stationed for a week of experimental workshops. By the end of the week they will compile their observations in a series of maps and digital images, each portraying a discrete set of urban phenomena, and present it to the public.

Between the United States and Europe there are perhaps a dozen similarly experimental groups attempting to grasp the dizzying political, economic, and technological changes affecting the local experience of place. These loosely affiliated networks operate at the margins of academic institu-



The Milan-based design group Multiplicity's *Uncertain States of Europe* project includes maps of the various political arrangements on the continent—the EU, NATO, the Northern Europe Council—pointing to the idea that there are many Europes.



tions and architectural practices. Their activities take the form of research projects, workshops, informal lectures, and exhibitions that catalog the physical effects of digital technology, urban sprawl, and globalization on the contemporary world.

"We're hoping to unpack knowledge about places that are going through an abrupt transition," says Srdjan Jovanovic Weiss, a New York-based Serbian architect who helped organize the SMS project. Inaugurated last year in Belgrade with a study of how the city's liberation has manifested itself in the changing names of streets and the shifting meaning of monuments, the program attempts to fill the gap between academic studies and everyday experiences of the urban environment.

Professional training in architecture, planning, and design has often simply lacked the tools to account for the rapid transformation of the built environment as a result of contemporary political and economic forces. "It's overused, but *globalization* is a term that architects, urban designers, and



The Metropolis Observe



theorists are still grappling with," says Mic Bell, who coordinates a research-intensive housing studio at the Columbia University School of Architecture. "The American economy is increasingly global, but architects and planners still have not dealt in any serious depth with the way space conceived within an American city."

Rem Koolhaas's *Project on the City*—in which groups of students from the Harvard Graduate School of Design are sent off to cities like Guangzhou and Lagos each year to document local effects of capitalism—is often credited with revolutionizing the way architects **continued on page**

think about political and economic aspects of space. "This kind of research is like collecting dirty things that should not be collected," says Jovanovic Weiss, who participated in the Harvard Guide to Shopping project in 1997. "But they are real things that are defining the urban situation, and nobody else is doing it."

Much of the social research performed by designers places a strong emphasis on the ability of visual images and graphic representations to transform the viewer's perspective. Milan-based Multiplicity, for example, led by architect and urban designer Stefano Boeri, has been researching the physical characteristics of urban space within the European Union since 2000 in a project called the Uncertain States of Europe (USE). Participants in USE workshops collect evidence of changing material conditions: satellite images of expanding swaths of urbanized territory, aerial photographs of urban aggregations, medium-range shots capturing idiosyncratic structures and activities, and close-up videos of immigrants talking about their experiences on the urban fringe. The evidence is then analyzed and deployed in visually absorbing exhibitions that use dazzling projections of contrasting images and graphics to simulate the dynamic transformations they portray. There is an acknowledged tension, however, between the idea of USE as a kind of pure research that is valuable in itself and the sense that the conditions being studied demand some kind of practical response from the designer.

Another group that focuses on the visual and aesthetic aspects of urban transformation is Berlin's Urban Drift, which has been organizing talks and exhibitions in sites that have been swept up by redevelopment. The group is inspired by the Situationist notion of *dérive*, or "drifting"—an avant-gardist technique of uncritically absorbing impressions from the physical environment. "We're trying to create a perceptual shift in the way one looks at architecture and architectural practice by bringing in different positions, looking at building spaces, intervening in spaces, and reworking leftover spaces," says Francesca Ferguson, the group's founder and artistic director. This fall their "Deutschlandscape" project for the Venice Architecture Biennale will present a panorama of 38 projects—a modular container-built studio in Munich, a deconstructed single-family home in Wandlitz, a coking plant turned swimming pool in Essen—that attempt to transform conventional patterns of development on the margins of German cities.

Other groups, such as 16 Beaver Group in New York and the international Nomads & Residents, are more interested in investigating urban transformation through informal networks that use the city as a kind of perpetual research experiment.

"Big cities are in a continuous flux," says Dutch artist Liesbeth Bik, who helped form Nomads & Residents in 2000. "Newcomers enter this flux and become part of the life of a city, which as a space contains possibilities through dynamic relationships between people." Talks are organized to introduce "nomads"—visiting artists, architects, or designers—and their work to "residents" in cities such as New York, Rotterdam, and Los Angeles. The informal network expands with each event, producing new connections between participants and promoting a cross-disciplinary exchange of ideas between people from every part of the world on occasional topics such as "Body Architecture," "Urban Genetics," and "Rethinking Nomadic Structures."

In contrast to groups engaged in open-ended avant-gardist research, there are also a few—like Crimson Architectural Historians, in Rotterdam; the Center for Land Use Interpretation, in Los Angeles; and the Center for Urban Pedagogy (CUP), in New York—that balance an interest in the aesthetic qualities of urban experience with a more pragmatic and rigorous approach that aspires to produce verifiable data with public policy implications and demonstrable consequences. Since 1995 CUP has been performing research, organizing workshops, teaching classes, and producing exhibitions that are especially attentive to the responsibility of the researcher-designer in relation to the urban conditions being studied. "We all believe in the old avant-garde rallying cry of, 'If you know what you're going to find out in the end, it's not really research,'" says Damon Rich, a designer who helped found the group. "On the other hand, we also believe equally strongly in action." The group's recent *City Without a Ghetto* exhibition—a capsule history of public housing in America using models, artifacts, and images—not only appealed to the sort of audience likely to attend an opening at the Storefront for Art and Architecture, but also invited residents of public housing developments to participate in workshops to learn how the agencies that control their environment function.

"A lot of research by designers serves as convincing proof that architects are not sociologists, and they're not economists, and they're not historians," Rich says. "I think that it's so great and so promising that institutions and publishers are starting to put resources behind this kind of work; but it points toward how much more work is needed to make substantial achievements in this kind of interdisciplinary research—to create products that aren't just cool to designers but are also respected by sociologists and political activists, and are actually useful."—Stephen Zacks