a form of architectural practice itself. Hence part of this agenda is strategic and lexical, involving a kind of semantic laundering within the curatorial discourse, which, when circulated, could become operative in order to shift what have become norms and to naturalize an alternative discourse; part of it is physical; and part is disciplinary, to consider the curator as a spatial practitioner when all, it seems, are eager to claim themselves as curators.

Like Demand's work, in which photography acts merely as a medium through which to present his sculpture, the gallery or exhibition hall becomes one discursive element within a spatial practice that mobilizes architecture within and outside the institution. Thus Demand's exhibition presents only half the story. If reason works when it exposes and yet still informs the Enlightenment position behind art, the difference here is that architecture proposes: it acts. If our own era is that of space, of juxtaposition, the near and the far, the side by side and the scattered, as Foucault writes; if the most pressing political issue of our day is the environment; if the exhibition has entered as the primary and artistic spatial construct of our day; and if the curator's medium is now space and things, then perhaps the most pressing curatorial question of the day is not what can be exhibited but what can be done. In architectural terms: What does one propose?

1. Architecture and Industrial Art were merged and renamed the Department of Architecture and Industrial Design in 1949. In 1967, the department assumed its current name, the Department of Architecture and Design.
October

Big Change: closed in
had as a sub text the
will be a hallmark of
"Small Scale
"glocal"
to reflect new sustainable and ecolog­
Engagement," curated by Andres
"Home Delivery"
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Currents: Projects for New York's Waterfront,
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It is, of course, difficult to assess the show’s success in
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161
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Once
served as the incubator rather than the mirror of new ideas.
160
the department's work over the next few years, ranging from
"Deconstructivist Architecture" exhibition curated by Philip Johnson and Mark Wigley in
1988 as perhaps the last great heroic taxonomic show – and
to propose that it might be possible to make a show about the
design process and about a paradigm shift based not on for­
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architectural authorship in an age of serial reproducibility.
It is, of course, difficult to assess the show’s success in
these terms, even if the number of visitors surpassed all pre­
vious records for attendance at a MoMA architecture or design
show. Certainly no new highways were opened up between
the world of, say, Dwell magazine, where much of the dis­
cussion of new horizons in factory-produced buildings is
given a popular forum, and the world of academic paramet­
ric research, which has rarely moved the debate beyond the
production of form to the definitions and fulfillment of pro­
grammatic issues, a position that has led in most cases to a
hyperbolic apolitical postcriticality. The inclusion of the
socially engaged work of Teddy Cruz, and the deadpan com­
mentary of Adam Kalkin, was also meant to suggest that a
political discourse around issues of serial production of archi­
tecture, divorced from the signature-seeking of starchitecture
and its clients and branding uses, might also be available. In
short, from the outset "Home Delivery" had as a subtext the
desire to engineer discussions, which, for the most part, I
must admit, did not take place in the printed critical response.
The collapse of the financial markets by the end of the exhi­
bition seemed to shift the frame for such discussions in ways
I could not have predicted.

Just one year after “Home Delivery” closed in October
2008 – in the midst of the meltdown of the financial markets af­
after the collapse of Lehman Brothers – MoMA launched a
research laboratory on issues less tangible but arguably more
pressing than how manufacturing might deliver new serially
produced, mass-customized architectures for new dwellings.
For “Rising Currents: Projects for New York’s Waterfront,”
we issued an invitation for design research to take on, in an
interdisciplinary way, urgent problems related to climate
change that are global in implication yet local in application
and design. The theme of the “glocal” will be a hallmark of
the department’s work over the next few years, ranging from
rewriting the program of the annual Young Architect
Program at MoMA PSA to reflect new sustainable and ecolog­
ical design ideas, to this fall’s survey, “Small Scale Big Change: Architectures of Social Engagement,” curated by Andres
Lepik to reflect architectures worldwide who not only design
projects but design processes to get things done.

With the “Rising Currents” workshop, the museum
served as the incubator rather than the mirror of new ideas.
Once before, in 1967, the Department of Architecture and
Design had engaged the pressing needs of the city and criti­
qued the wholesale models of federal urban renewal with
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an invitation to teams representing four university schools of architecture to work on counterproposals for four areas of Manhattan slated for massive redevelopment. The resulting exhibition, “The New City,” sparked a debate in the press and, to a limited extent, in the public/government arena. Today, with the availability of MoMA PS1 as a kind of research tank and of the Internet as a way of engaging the public on an ongoing basis, an entirely new approach is possible. The current context and approach are significantly different from 40 years ago when it was thought the city needed to be bulldozed in order to be saved. Now the federal government is making massive investments in infrastructure projects, trying to kill two birds—infrastructure renewal and unemployment relief—with one $787 billion stimulus package—or at least that was the figure at the time we launched the project “Rising Currents.” In recent months the discourse has moved toward austerity. This has been a very noble, if deeply flawed, effort. Clearly it is one with inherent conflicts and paradoxes—not the least of which is the typical atomization of projects by local congressional districts rather than the development of paradigm-changing projects that might mark the US as a country leading planning and technology in the 21st century the way it did in the founding years of MoMA. Today, the need to begin construction immediately to pump capital into the economy necessarily shortchanges the study of new solutions to vital problems. “Shovel-ready” and “innovation” are not congruent, nor do they conjugate easily, and certainly not in the conditional, or at the very least, the future conditional, which was the verb tense of the MoMA project. With “Rising Currents” I set out to exploit the role of images as catalysts for a debate and for a culture in which the design professions recapture a place at the table of the most important national debates about everything from land use to infrastructure. “Rising Currents” (on view March 21 to October 11, 2010) was a very particular experiment to demonstrate that the design professions—planners, architects, landscape designers, engineers—need to be part of the ongoing experimental research and, more importantly, that visualization is fundamental to reacting to climate change even as we collate existing and future research from climate scientists.

As such, “Rising Currents” inaugurates a series of workshops at MoMA with the ambition to address issues of pressing concern through new design thinking. The challenge is to give compelling visual form to issues that a general public more frequently encounters as alarming news stories, many of which lose their potency with exposure, even if their serious challenges are never diminishing. Other workshops/exhibitions are now in development. Each will be like the “Rising Currents” project—a combination of a major in-depth research study by a team outside the museum, which will make available both raw and analyzed data and a set of hypotheses, and a workshop. The short-term strategy is to conduct highly visible public workshops that allow designers to respond to and visualize an issue with the public, who can witness and comment on the work in progress, and thus offer solutions as well as learn about the nature of design as a problem-solving technique. Few issues could be seen as more pertinent to a “glocal” approach than the predicted two- to six-foot rise in global sea level as a result of climate change. The issue is not simply geographic but demographic and economic, as billions of people in heavily populated areas around the world will be directly affected, including New York Harbor. Indeed, ten of the world’s 15 largest cities are in low-lying coastal areas vulnerable to rising sea levels.

Fundamental to “Rising Currents” was that each design team was given On the Water: Palisade Bay, a study of the bathymetry of the harbor by Guy Nordenson, Catherine Seavitt, and Adam Yarinsky. This made it possible for them to focus on researching individual sites and their characteristics, and then turn rapidly to design solutions. The book is both a historical account of the transformation of New York Harbor from one of the world’s greatest natural harbors into one of its most elaborately reconfigured man-made ports, and a manual for intervening in the harbor as the new focal point of the city. The study offers compelling graphic research into the future of the coastline as it faces the scenario of a sea-level rise of two feet by 2080—the conservative figure now enshrined in city policy by its inclusion in the Bloomberg administration’s PlANYC 2030, released on Earth Day 2007. The Nordenson/Seavitt/Yarinsky study is a multipronged manifesto in its own right, which I interpreted as the foundation for “Rising Currents.” In the post-Hurricane Katrina environment in which the study was conceived, it proposes defensive “soft” infrastructural solutions. The conventional response to flooding has been hard engineering: cities fortify their coasts to protect real estate at the expense of nature. If this approach persists as the default solution, seawalls and bulkheads will be raised to define a clear boundary between dry land and deep water, while native tidal wetlands along the coast will erode and eventually wash away. . . . The hard engineering habit has proven costly, unreliable and often ineffective.
The disastrous failure of the levees in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina speaks to our excessive reliance on this risky solution to flood control . . . 5

Capitalizing on a breach in the national faith in the US Army Corps of Engineers, On the Water instead explores soft infrastructural techniques, claiming, "Our goal is to layer those priorities through the harbor zones to not only create a comprehensive storm defense system but to provide new places for recreation, agriculture, ecologies and urban development."6

Nordenson brought this study to me in 2008 as a possible basis for a MoMA architecture exhibition. Wearyed by the prevalence in architecture today of "data-scape" techniques, pioneered by Rem Koolhaas and MVRDV to great effect but too often rendering information more as an ornamental auxiliary to an issue than to a hard-core engagement with it, I was at first skeptical. I told Nordenson that for his remarkable study to become an exhibition at MoMA, we would need to find a way to make the leap from research and charts to an exhibition of architecture. Over the course of 2008 we discussed scenarios for designing an exhibition. An early idea was to bring together some of the work underway in the Netherlands, and to show how cities from Antwerp to Copenhagen, Marseille to Dublin, have all been rethinking their ports, not only in postindustrializing scenarios, but also in relation to climate change. For a while we discussed inviting some of the most successful Dutch designers to New Amsterdam to see how they might respond to On the Water. The study includes a vocabulary of artificial islands, some made out of discarded New York City subway cars that in recent years have been shipped to places like Cape May, New Jersey, for jetty construction, as well as images of wind farms, oyster restoration, and the creation of absorptive wetlands by accepting that areas of the city would – like Venice – simply be allowed to submerge under occasional aqua alta. In September 2008 I was at the previews of the Venice Architecture Biennale contemplating the latest variants of parametric design while following the collapse of Lehman Brothers in the morning newspapers. By the end of the year the layoffs in New York architecture firms had reached alarming levels, and I wondered how we could propose to the professional part of our audience a demonstration of how foreign expertise was needed for New York to face the future. From that was born the idea of the workshops and of the dual meaning of "Rising Currents": turning the rising sea levels from an enemy to be combated to a new condition to be designed for – from problem to opportunity, if you will – and tapping the generation of architects and designers poised to make significant contributions who might be lost to the profession without a small-scale stimulus package for their brain power. When we were successful in our application for a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation to provide funds for teams to take up residence at MoMA PS1 under the new "Free Space" program conceived by Klaus Biesenbach and Kathy Halbreich, we embarked on defining a new kind of activist exhibition. In September 2009 invitations were sent to some 60 educators and leading practitioners in architecture, landscape architecture, and engineering to nominate emerging design talent with up to ten years of independent experience to assemble teams. In November the teams took up residence at MoMA PS1 for an intense eight weeks, punctuated by weekly reviews by myself, and often Nordenson, Seavitt, and other expert guests, some invited by us, some invited by the teams. Nearly 30 people were in residence, and they worked in a spirit of cooperation and exchange of ideas both within and among the teams. And I found that a new role for a curator had emerged, with elements of handmaiden, studio critic, and convener for both the public and political agencies.

Early on, visitors provided important preliminary information, notably hydrologists from the School of Marine and Atmospheric Sciences at SUNY Stony Brook, who already six years ago proposed the construction of three flood gates to be sited at the Narrows between Brooklyn and Staten Island, at the upper end of the East River, and in the tidal strait between New Jersey and Staten Island – techniques modeled on the Delta Works in the Netherlands and the Thames Barrier in London. Others came from the Regional Plan Association, from the Quadracentennial Committee for the Hudson River, from the Port Authority, and from the city's Departments of Parks & Recreation and of City Planning, and the Mayor's Office of Long-term Planning and Sustainability. We sought to engage them with the initiating role designers might play in thinking about pressing issues. Twice the general public was invited to open houses in the studios to imbibe the atmosphere of architectural research and design and to hear the teams describe their work in progress.

"Your mission is to come up with images that are so compelling they can't be forgotten and so realistic that they can't be dismissed," was the principle guideline I set for the project and frequently reiterated. The exercise itself dealt with considerable data about topography and bathymetry, existing conditions and transit, and climate change projections, but it
was not constrained by current land-use laws in New York City or in any sustained way with land-ownership issues or political jurisdictions.

The team leaders in each case were recently established practitioners, most of them dividing practice between a small-to-medium-sized office and teaching in a school of architecture. Although talented designers from New Orleans and San Francisco — where a sister project called “Rising Tides” was undertaken last year — made interesting presentations during the interviews, the residency aspect of the workshop led the jury to select teams from four emerging architectural and landscape studios in New York: SCAPE Studio (Kate Orff), Matthew Baird Architects, nARCHITECTS (Eric Bunge and Mimi Hoang), and LTL Architects (Lewis Tsurumaki Lewis). ARO was invited to extend its thinking on Lower Manhattan undertaken for On the Water, now teaming up with Susanna Drake of dlandstudio. All five teams were charged with developing soft infrastructural solutions to rising sea levels in their respective zones, chosen not only for their strategic importance to the shape of the city but also for the variety of situations these “soundings” could provide. They worked in collaborative exchange but were not charged with creating a master plan.

There is not room here to describe the projects — these are recorded on the Web site, and an excellent review of the exhibition appeared in Log 19. Rather, it is worth recording the process of this approach to advocacy curating in order to think about its potential to engage both designers and museums more purposefully in viral national and international debates. There are indeed perils, not the least the dilemma that happily I did not encounter: that of feeling that the results of the workshop did not merit display in the Museum of Modern Art, where the art museum context automatically suggests endorsement and designation as worthy of sharing gallery space with Picasso, Matisse, Le Corbusier, and Mies.

The exhibition here is seen not as the end result, a coronation, or admission into Valhalla, but rather as an imaged catalyst. The aim is, through the blog, through public programs, and through work that others will do, to launch a debate that can far outlive the ephemeral event of the exhibition (even as we are studying chances to install it in places where it might have equal resonance, say, in New Orleans). These visions stick with people because they fundamentally change the scope of the discussion. They also offer a vision of the city that has many attractive features, even putting the issue of climate change aside. They seize opportunities rather than merely solving problems, what planners call “co-benefits.”

Admittedly, some are bewildered by this new use of the museum not as a sanctuary for fighting a battle in a war I consider long won, namely, the status of architecture as art. For me, this critique — most recently voiced in the surprising setting of a presentation of the project to students and critics at the Metropolitan University of Caracas in Hugo Chávez’s Venezuela — arrives rather belatedly. MoMA was founded within days of the stock market crash of 1929 and came of age in the Depression. From the first its agenda was multifold. Even if most architectural histories have preferred to retain the aesthetic manifesto of Johnson and Hitchcock’s seminal International Style exhibition, in fact the most sustained activity of the department’s first decade was exhibitions and programs advocating for better public housing. These had direct impacts on the creation of the New York City Housing Authority in 1934 and on the passage of the Federal Housing Act of 1937. The renewal of this advocacy role seems to me increasingly urgent in defining the role for a Department of Architecture and Design not only as a mirror of the range of invention, innovation, and artistry to be found in the design professions, but also as an instrument, even an agent, for the engagement of the design professions with the most pressing issues of the day.

8. Much of this was due to the activism of the young Catherine Bauer and the advocacy of Lewis Mumford.


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