

A man with a long, grey beard and a dark button-down shirt stands in the center of a room. The walls, floor, and ceiling are covered in a dense grid of small, square photographs. The man is looking directly at the camera. A large black speech bubble is positioned to his right, containing the text 'WAKING UP TO MASSIVE CHANGE'.

WAKING UP TO MASSIVE CHANGE

An inspiring, if not sobering, look at the transformative power of design

For most of us, design is invisible... until it fails.

BY MANDA AUFOCHS GILLESPIE

Climate change, poverty and famine, AIDS, the wars in the Middle East, waste choking the planet, skyrocketing home costs and poisons accumulating in our food and water. Are these ills indicative of the world's largest design failure?

In the shadow of hopelessness, it might be surprising to meet the animated and eternally optimistic Bruce Mau, the man behind Massive Change, a project that "explores the legacy and potential, the promise and power, of design in improving the welfare of humanity." In simplest terms, Mau might be called a graphic designer. He's known for his revolutionary design books like *S, M, L, and XL*. However, as the exhibit itself shows, Mau is much more than that. He's a change agent.

The Massive Change exhibit, currently occupying 12,000 square feet of Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art, is a collaboration between Bruce Mau Design and the Institute without Boundaries, a design think-tank tasked with researching the capacity of human efforts to change the world.

What has emerged from the alliance is an inspiring, if not sobering, look at the transformative power of design. In a world where technological capacity doubles every 12 months, the next 20 years will bring a "billion-fold increase in new possibilities." To designers Mau says, "You don't need to learn QuarkXpress; you need to learn how to deal with a changing landscape."

The Massive Change exhibit identifies and explores 12 of these changing landscapes, or "economies." Each economy—defined here as a "man-made ecology, a dynamic, changing system with numerous inputs and outputs"—commands its own gallery space.

And while the widgets and wonders on display are often hard to believe, Massive Change isn't like the old World's Fair model of futuristic gizmos that may one day come to pass. Every piece exhibited already exists in today's world. "This is what differentiates Massive



massivechange.com





Change,” says Doug Chapman, a former student of the Institute without Boundaries. “It is forward-thinking and forward-looking, but is based solidly on what we know today.”

Getting a personal tour of the exhibit by Mau himself substantially boosts the awe factor. Passing through the Movement Economy gallery—which features sustainable vehicles ranging from the everyday (an Indian bicycle rickshaw) to the out of this world (the Twike, the most efficient motorized vehicle on the

market at 550 miles per gallon)—Mau muses, “In a world that has not embraced secular democracy, we have, nevertheless, embraced traffic.” But the snark is delivered with a full-faced grin, nearly occluded by his lengthy, sprawling, two-toned beard. Mau laughs a lot, but that makes sense—he traffics in heady stuff. His humor communicates his underlying belief that no matter how bad the world’s problems may seem, they’re manageable.

Indeed. With China fast abandoning the bi-

cycle for the car, one shudders to think what a world with a billion more drivers might look—and feel—like. Mau opines that “the radical success of the car is also its failure,” pointing out that the average speed of a car today is eight miles an hour, with 43 percent of its fuel usage occurring while idling or gridlocked.

“We will design evolution,” Mau proclaims in the Living Economies, and he’s not just being provocative or bombastic. “People think of dogs and tomatoes and they think these things

are natural. But look at the Labradoodle and tell me we aren't influencing the design of nature."

As museum visitors contemplate a featherless chicken, selectively bred to require less water for easier "processing" in hot climates, the public is invited to express sentiments about whether or not "we," as a global community, should be pursuing the various kinds of genetic modification on display. In up to two-foot type, the walls list the pros and cons. No side is taken.

"Not everything [exhibited] is the perfect thing," Chapman points out. "This is part of

what makes this project different. It isn't so quick to say what is right and what is wrong."

The show exalts the visionary vanguard rethinking our world. There is William McDonough of the oft-repeated mantra, "Waste = Food", whose work has inspired the development of material that can be recycled endlessly. There is Hazel Henderson, economist behind the concept of the "caring economy"; Hernando de Soto ideas on redesigning property law; and Jaime Lerner, former mayor of Curitiba, Brazil, the world's "most sustainable city."

Unfortunately, missing from the entire package is populism, or perhaps more appropriately,

packaged populism. Massive Change is, after all, in an art gallery, in a cosmopolitan global city, where people pay to see "the great things." It can seem mighty elitist or patronizing, if not simply inaccessible to most. Yet every product on display, although conceived by visionaries, was invented to democratize a technology previously privy only to the ivory tower, and the implicit message is that the coming billion-fold potential can creatively liberate *everyone*.

Will we democratize our technology and information fast enough for the millions squatting in cardboard hovels or bumper-to-bumper in city streets? Population growth and the built





environment dominate the multi-media gallery of the Urban Economies. In one century, we learn, the world's population has gone from 1- to 6 billion, while life expectancy has doubled. At the same time, a majority of the world's population has relocated to urban areas.

We are confronted with the looming challenges of a series of megalopolises—Sao Paolo, Tokyo, Shanghai, Chicago, Hong Kong—as we contemplate the expectations we have for our own living spaces. Can the planet support 9 billion people, all with their own houses, cars and yards? Even though innovative new building materials and public policies will be key to making the world's growing population more comfortable and sustainable, the familiar subtext is clear: *we must change the way we live, too.*

"In human history, being able to see change coming made the difference between life and death," Mau proffers. For what we can see, we can believe, and what we believe, we can change. Massive Change's mission is to make designers, or responsible change-agents, out of us all. Not because of a billion-fold increase in technological capacity, but because people *do* care, the future *might* be better than the present and someone is obviously having fun making it happen.

In other words, there just might be hope.

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