

The following article was published by AIGA in 2004; and still speaks well to the art of collaboration between the design professions.



**the
professional
association
for
design**

Living in an Urban World: how do architects and designers collaborate?

Article by [Ronni Rosenberg](#) October 04, 2004

Filed Under: [Tools and Resources](#) , [Article](#) , [architecture](#)

Link: <https://www.aiga.org/living-in-an-urban-world-how-do-architects-and-designers-collaborate>

Architects and graphic designers have long records of working together. Many large architectural firms offer environmental graphic design services through their own in-house design teams. Firms such as Pentagram and IDEO are confederations of integrated design disciplines. As one examines professional practices, it is evident that boundaries between professional territories are continuing to dissolve, mutate and be reinvented.

Technology is the great instigator behind this design revolution, and the urban environment is the arena where this is being played out. The city is a stage for human interaction, cultural production and the communication of meaning. New definitions for the delivery of design services need to be understood in the context of the urban environment.

Commenting on the synergy between designed architectural form and the vernacular urban environment, architect Robert Venturi proclaimed with customary bravado in a June 2000 interview:

AIGA brings design to the world, and the world to designers.

Founded in 1914 as the American Institute of Graphic Arts, AIGA is now known simply as "AIGA, the professional association for design."

As the profession's oldest and largest professional membership organization for design—with more than 70 chapters and more than 25,000 members—we advance design as a professional craft, strategic advantage, and vital cultural force. From content that defines the global practice to events that connect and catalyze, we work to enhance the value and deepen the impact of design across all disciplines on business, society, and our collective future.

“Remember, it’s not about Space any more; it’s about Communication. [Down with] Space and Structure of then; viva Symbolism and Iconography of now!” This challenge to the architectural profession reads as an open invitation to forge new alliances with other design professionals. And that is precisely what is happening.

So, where in our urban environment can we find some new examples of this kind of collaboration? On a recent trip to Seattle, I visited the newly constructed Seattle Public Library by architect Rem Koolhaas and graphic designer Bruce Mau. Something new is in the air, and it is not simply the effect of celebrity architecture spun off from the mother of building-magnets — Frank Gehry’s Guggenheim Museum at Bilbao. One senses something more profound, more rousing: this building — both from the outside and within — is making a rhetorical statement about the public sphere. As a public library, and particularly one that it is situated in civic-minded Seattle, this building seems to be truly public. Twenty minutes before the doors opened one morning, there were line-ups of all sorts of people: tourists, children, parents, professionals and people that might otherwise have spent their day sitting on a sidewalk outside of a McDonald’s. How does the building exert this pull?

Sited on a steep slope, the building envelope which is sheathed uniformly in a diagonal mesh of steel, unfolds like origami in surprising geometries as it adapts to the topography. Inside, the building seems to speak. Koolhaas’ ideas about the 21st century library are evident in the formal elements, while Mau gives them a bold flourish. The discrete library functions are evident as distinct tableaux, floor plates that float in the open atrium. Mau identifies each with large graphics in futura bold, embedded in the architectural finishes.

With terms like “living room” and “mixing chamber,” we are seeing the evidence of a fruitful collaboration between architect and communicator. The terms themselves telegraph a conceptualized approach as to how one might use the library. The oversized words take on a prominent role in the visual environment; they seem to juxtapose text with image in a kind of synergy between equals.

One of the generative ideas of the building is the “book spiral.” This is where the books are actually stored, the stacks above the open floor plates of browsing and telecommunicating. A neon yellow escalator, lettered with “book spiral” and “reading room” takes you up. Once you alight from the escalator and start your exploration, you realize that you are participating in the “spiral.” The floors are inclined, ramping like a parking garage. You feel as if you are participating not only in the steep site of the building, but in a central idea of the library — book warehousing. You are literally propelled through this image: the dense cluster of books that unwinds in a continuous ramp. The call numbers are arrayed on the floor in Mau’s specially designed rubber mats.

But a curious thing happens on the way down. You get lost. The building, so open and verbal on the way in, now falls silent and cryptic. It fails to communicate an exit strategy. Little improvised flyers, explaining how to exit, are tacked to the walls and attest to the wayfinding puzzle. If anything, this seems to undermine the close collaboration of architect and graphic designer. Finding one’s way in an environment depends on legible spatial form, reinforced by language. We constantly negotiate between these two perceptual domains as we seek our destinations in increasingly complex urban environments. Koolhaas’ and Mau’s collaboration through the earliest stages of the design process is evident throughout the building until this moment.

It is not clear why this is so. Is it because there is an "up" escalator, but no "down" escalator — a strategy borrowed from the world of retail? Or is it a failure of signage? How will this problem — so clearly acknowledged by the flyers — finally be solved?

When I posed these questions to Josh Ramus, project architect from Rem Koolhaas' OMA New York office, he answers that the design team took a wait-and-see approach to study how people actually navigate from "scale to scale" within the library. The design team has been surprised and delighted to see how clearly the building communicates visually on a broad scale, and that people are able to move easily from domain to domain, level to level. Yet some confusion remains, he acknowledges, in a more micro-scaled context: Where am I at this moment in relation to the escalator?

In terms of wayfinding, he says, the decision was made early on for the scheme to stay bold, yet simple. "Basically," he says, "architectural orienting devices are limited to the escalator and elevator. We only wanted to add one more layer beyond that." Interestingly, this is precisely the layer that has been withheld to date, waiting in the wings as a solution should the post-occupancy evaluation call for it. And it has. What form has this "layer" taken? I contacted Bruce Mau's studio and spoke with his project designer, Henry Cheung. According to Cheung, this secondary wayfinding system coalesced early in the design process. The primary system, he said, depends on the wordmark as landmark. Cheung refers to these wordmarked spaces as "urban typologies." The constant reference point is the urban environment; for example, you navigate from an urban plaza, to the reading room or mixing chamber, to a more densely clustered neighbourhood: the book spiral.

Closely following this visual logic, Mau and Koolhaas have developed a secondary wayfinding system based on the imagery of street signs. This signage system, when installed, will announce itself at the front door.

Speaking to both Henry Cheung and Josh Ramus, it is clear that at the outset, the generative project was to go back to first principles and deeply understand how one spatializes the search for information. How do you physically navigate the various layers and scales of a goal that can start as a vaguely defined pursuit? Progressively, this pursuit must be clarified and focused in order to retrieve the relevant information — the right book, the right periodical. How does this pursuit play out in concrete form?

According to Ramus, studying this process was an important reason to collaborate with Bruce Mau. He says that Rem Koolhaas' practice is distinguished by its desire for collaboration. They seek out collaborators to work with at the earliest stages of design. According to Ramus, Mau is a deeply trusted collaborator, able to share and elucidate Koolhaas' vision. Cheung also testifies that Bruce Mau's design practice is defined by the etymological meaning of "studio" as a place of study.

Together, the design team closely studied the issues of information retrieval in the 21st century, and posed the question this way: What are the physical domains, the spatial scales, that assert themselves between your initial quest for information and the final retrieval in the form of a specific number in the Dewey decimal system?

As an architect, graphic designer, and educator grappling with these issues of "collaboration," visiting the Seattle Public Library building was an exhilarating moment for me. It confirmed the fruit of this kind of collaboration. As a design educator, I have been asking: How should we educate the next generation of designers to achieve this level of environmental literacy, so they can understand how to even ask the right questions? How can design curriculum keep up with the new synergy between disciplines?

Design programs need to reflect this new plurality in our design universe. Courses need to be designed to help connect these dots.

At the York/Sheridan Joint Program in Design, we have developed a course called "Communication in the Urban Environment." When students register for it, they have no idea what to expect. Is this a course about signage? Buildings? Getting around the cities amid the cacophony of language, in its many forms? It turns out that it is all of these things, yet more. The content of this course is dynamic, yet essential. For designers, the urban setting demands architectural literacy. It also demands a critical user, able to make cultural meaning of form and function. This course is a great platform and context to make critical connections. It reminds students: it's all about collaboration.