reviews of lectures, exhibitions, and events of note

Ephemera

Milton Glaser: To Inform and Delight

Directed by Wendy Keys
DVD, 73 minutes
New Video Group, 2010

This aptly titled documentary offers a portrait of one of the most revered graphic designers of our time. Who hasn’t seen Milton’s “I ❤ NY” campaign or his iconic Dylan poster? As a co-founder of Push Pin Studios in 1954, Glaser, along with his cohorts, provided a truly American counterpoint to the prevailing Swiss design ethos by incorporating idea-based illustration into publishing and branding projects.

Clever, articulate, and charming, Glaser is the movie’s greatest asset, and director Wendy Keys doesn’t skimp on his colorful commentary and anecdotes from his 60-year career as a thinking artist, designer, teacher, mentor, and New Yorker. At the heart of Glaser’s appeal is his love and respect for his chosen profession, which is amply returned: Everyone ❤ Milton.

Mark Pasnik and Chris Grimley are two men on a mission. As the directors of pinkcomma gallery and self-proclaimed guides to Boston’s “design underground,” they are dedicated to showcasing a new generation of talented architects and designers in the city. In more than a dozen small and provocative shows since the gallery’s opening in 2007, they have demonstrated that the design culture of Boston is vibrant and energized beyond the walls of the area architecture schools.

Their ambitious and most recent initiative is the first Design Biennial, curated with Michael Kubo, featuring a juried selection of five emerging practices. Highlights of the exhibition include the serenely beautiful geometric study of an A-frame house by William O’Brien Jr., a spatially and materially ingenious back-lot house by Touloukian Touloukian, and a playful proposal to “graft” a community center onto the roof of a supermarket by Carla Ceruzzi and Ryan Murphy of C&MP.

Dan Hisel’s Heavy/Light House makes visible the poetic potential of abandoned infrastructure and Gretchen Schneider’s “Making Time Visible” project, which draws the footprint of Scollay Square onto City Hall Plaza, creates a simultaneous understanding of past and present city structure.

A snapshot of the preoccupations of this generation of Boston architects at this moment in time reveals an interest in “smart design” enabled by digital technology, an innovative exploration of craft and the sensual and tactile qualities of building, and a reflection on history concurrent with an enthusiasm for the future. The exhibition presents images from different architects side-by-side, making it difficult to grasp a coherent view of each author’s work. But the pleasure of unexpected visual connections between projects is worth the experiment, as is the introduction of a welcome new event on the city’s design calendar.

Clif Stoltze is a graphic designer and the principal of Stoltze Design in Boston.

Design Biennial Boston 2010

pinkcomma gallery, Boston
April 30–June 10, 2010
www.pinkcomma.com

Andrea Leers FAIA is a principal of Leers Weinzapfel Associates and adjunct professor of architecture and urban design at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, where she is also director of the urban design program.
Home Work: Contemporary Housing Delivery Systems
Northeastern University
April 3, 2010

Although this conference was called Home Work: Contemporary Housing Delivery Systems, it could have been called The Search for the Holy Grail. The allusion, made only half in jest, captures the idealistic belief of many of those presenting: armed with the right high-style, low-cost building systems, architects can reclaim the housing design kingdom lost to bottom-line builders and developers.

The first of three panels looked at the history and mythologies of architect-designed prefabricated housing. Efficient production, they suggested, can bring Modernism to the masses and create an authentic contemporary vernacular. Peter Christensen, curator of MoMA’s 2008 prefab housing exhibition, Karrie Jacobs, former editor of Dwell magazine, and Matthew Littell of Uitle provided a survey of the technical explorations, formal investigations, and utopian aspirations that have inspired and frustrated designers for generations.

The second panel presented four delivery systems based on very different models. Houston-based Hometta sells stock house plans by up-and-coming young Modernist architects — for up-and-coming young Modernist buyers missing the money for a custom design. Bluhomes manufactures panelized houses that can be ordered online and unfolded on site. And Northeastern’s Peter Wiederspahn is developing e3Co, a foam-block and plywood building system reminiscent of larger-than-life Legos.

Joe Tanney of Res4Arch offered the most convincing evidence that prefabrication can help architects battle the purveyors of vinyl-clad Colonials. His custom-designed modules are based on a rigorous analysis of programmatic needs and production constraints; over the past decade, he has produced a stunning series of completed houses. Abstract but accessible, well-appointed but affordable, they hint that the Holy Grail might be within reach.

The third panel, however, laid out the vast terrain still to be conquered. Affordable-housing developer Peter Roth described the economic and political challenges that tend to defy architectural solutions. Architecture department chairman George Thrush and conference organizer Ivan Rupnik contrasted the single-family focus of the prefab effort with the need for a broad range of multifamily options. And David Wax of Free Green reminded the room full of designers that they can’t create their own markets but must respond to ones that exist. Good intentions and great design may not be sufficient to fight the dark forces controlling development — and to deliver the iHouse Thrush suggested we should be searching for.

David Eisen is a principal at Abacus Architects + Planners in Boston and writes about architecture and design for a variety of publications.