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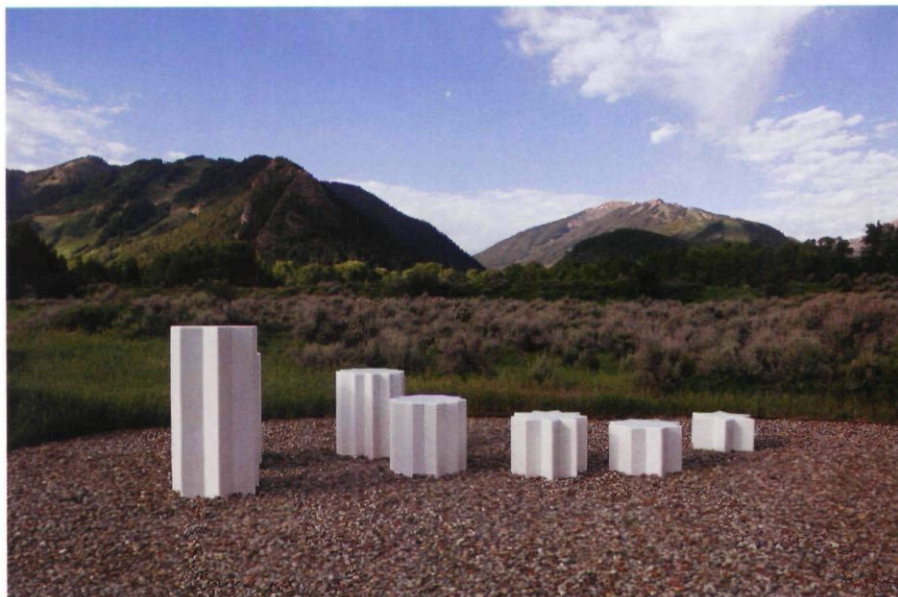
Review by Alice Twemlow

Hunts Point is a 28-acre piece of industrial wasteland in the South Bronx whose future hangs in the balance. Majora Carter, head of the community organization Sustainable South Bronx, wants to use the site to build a “greenway” that would include bike and pedestrian paths. Carter’s proposal is as pragmatic as it is idealistic. It has New York City’s Economic Development Corporation as the government sponsor, and a design by Mathews Nielsen, an esteemed landscape architecture firm. Earlier in the year, the city had given her \$100,000 to develop a feasibility study. But then, last June, Carter and her team were crushed to learn that despite the city’s ostensible interest in their proposal, it was, in fact, already making plans to use the land for the construction of a 2,000-bed prison.

This was one of the real-life challenges presented by real-life clients to the 200 participants gathered at the 2006 Aspen Design Summit. I use the words *summit* and *participants* advisedly because, as the event’s organizers told us repeatedly, this was not a *conference*, and we therefore were not an *audience*. Rather, as the program brochure put it, we were there to “work together to develop innovative contributions toward solving large-scale global problems.”

Such idealism certainly connects this summit to its predecessor, the International Design Conference at Aspen, but the new format represents a departure. First held in 1951, the Aspen Design Conference was very much a *conference*, with all the usual trappings: a main stage, a select roster of design-star speakers, and a thoughtful academic who delivered papers and partook in panels. In many ways, Aspen was really the archetypal design conference.

Two years ago, AIGA took over the



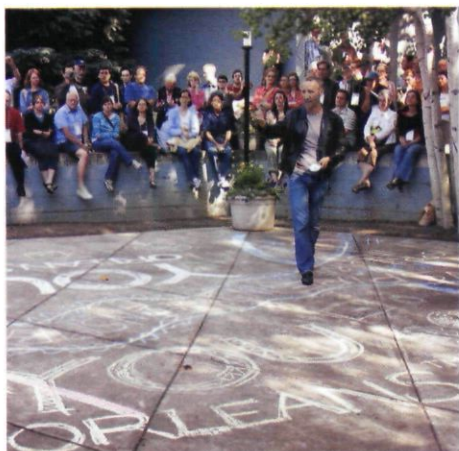
Above: *Big Dipper* sculpture by Matthias Goeritz, 1973, on grounds of the Herbert Bayer–designed Aspen Institute. **Following page:** Nik Hafermaas presents a rebuilding campaign for New Orleans. Photos: Bo Bickerstaff.

stewardship of Aspen from a financially strapped IDCA, a notable turn of events for several reasons. It’s well known that Aspen has traditionally catered more to product designers and architects than to graphic designers. By adding Aspen to its roster of events and programs, AIGA seemed to be claiming a place for graphic design at the high table. But early this year, AIGA announced a new tag line: “the professional association for design.” This all-encompassing phrase enables the organization to shrug off the last remnants of its connection with the “graphic arts,” which it may have seen as restrictive. The change also signals that AIGA isn’t just bringing graphic designers to join the multidisciplinary party—from now on, it’s running the party.

The first of the three challenges put to the summit participants centered on “Education Innovation” and was presented by Elliot Washor, a champion of experimental pedagogy, and Frank Wilson, an expert on cognitive and artistic development, who both wanted to know how design thinking

could enhance learning in secondary schools. The second challenge, “Sustainable Community Development,” was two-pronged: There was Carter’s South Bronx dilemma, and there was a new initiative, being developed by Sergio Palleroni at the University of Texas, to reuse waste materials in New Orleans to help the local communities build furniture. The third addressed “Social Entrepreneurship” and was introduced by Paul Polak of International Development Enterprises, an organization that aims to reduce rural poverty by making low-cost technologies available to small-scale farmers.

Summit participants broke up into “studios” of 10 to 15 people, each with a moderator, to define a problem, come up with a solution, and prepare a presentation to deliver to the whole group at the end of the summit. Setting out to turn a conference from a passive experience into an active working meeting is ambitious—and invigorating. There’s an unaccountably strong reflex that engages and drives you to action when you realize that it’s going to



be you—and 14 colleagues seated in a room with you—that will be entirely responsible for the quality of your experience over the next three days. In fact, when this reflex switches on in personalities that are already highly strung and anxious about missing work, the results can be problematic: After only a few hours with his team, one moderator quit, citing too many Type A personalities in one room.

As a setting for noble thoughts and actions, Aspen could not be more propitious. The Herbert Bayer–designed resort that has hosted the Aspen Design Conference since its founding is set on 40 acres of meadowland surrounded by the Colorado Rockies. But the natural beauty and the headiness of the thin atmosphere are not the only factors that encourage the formulation of grand and worthy schemes; it's also the distance that's between you and humdrum concerns of everyday life. In his opening remarks, *Doors of Perception* director John Thackara stressed the importance of finding the time and space for reflection. The danger of the summit setup, however, is that it's more likely to foster panic than introspection. Presentations had to be delivered in three minutes in front of a sizable audience complete with countdown and gong. In such situations, nuanced thinking is replaced by slapstick, and good intentions devolve into the clamor of a high-school talent show.

Among the amateur theatrics were some genuinely smart ideas. Inspired by

the need for alternative educational models where handwork is prioritized, one group came up with Design Lunchbox, a kit filled with imaginative and easy-to-implement activities. One of the projects, called “My Chair,” gives each student in a class his or her own chair—and the opportunity to embellish and evolve that design over the course of the year.

This idea of the lunchbox kit found its equivalent in solutions to the other challenges. My group sought recourse in the safe and ambiguous language of tools and road maps, I think, because we felt these were concepts that were flexible enough to encompass the large and unruly issues with which we were presented.

Of course, a client with complicated issues like Carter could hardly arrive at the summit expecting a neatly packaged solution to take home, but had she come to a meeting of people who still called themselves “graphic designers,” she might well have obtained a visual strategy of some kind to help her present her case. As it was, of the three solutions to Carter’s problem, the one she—and the rest of the participants—warmed to most was a proposal for an advertising campaign that made use of graphic imagery. A pitch responding to Palleroni’s initiative, which led participants outside to a chalked theater-in-the-round, was popular and deemed usable, I think, because it was so neatly branded—so *graphic*. Its identity, “You Orleans,” was rough-and-ready (a tag line surrounded by recycling arrows done in felt pen on a set of beer mats), but it encapsulated the larger ideas of the proposal, which aimed to connect residents of New Orleans on the street level to several hands-on rebuilding initiatives.

These examples showed that graphic design remains a force to be reckoned with. But it’s still vital for AIGA to map out a viable future for graphic designers by aligning itself with a more expansive definition of

design. Furthermore, taking measures to position design at the center of the burgeoning industry tackling global social problems is smart and necessary.

The Aspen Summit appears set to provide AIGA with just the kind of annual incubator it needs to enable participants to take risks and test out new ideas. In addition to the practical nature of the new workshop-oriented format, however, future summits need to include more space for high-level discussion. Some fascinating ideas about design were generated in the course of the three days. One of these thematic threads was the newfound interest in the local, the small-scale, and the specific. In the context of social entrepreneurship, Paul Polak believes that the key to eradicating rural poverty lies in changes made at the micro-scale of the small farmer. Others, too, have realized that the success of most design endeavors depends less upon individual brilliance and more upon empowering communities at a local level.

This concept strikes at the very heart of the profession. It means designers need to learn how to listen to what a community is saying. More challenging for some, it brings into question the very notion of a designer as someone who delivers a completed solution to a grateful group of users. AIGA’s choice of format for the summit manifests similar thinking. It chose not to have big-name designers presenting client-centric solutions from an elevated stage. Instead, it chose to assemble roundtable committees of people to hash out a collaborative solution that was not a physical piece of design, but rather something closer to an alternative definition of the word *design*—a plan. By encouraging designers to rethink their traditional roles as top-down envoys of hermetically sealed solutions, and to become instead facilitators of discussion at the community level, AIGA shows it also has a plan—and an admirable one at that. **P**

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