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'Capital' City: Creating an Approach to Urban Development in a Monumental City

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'Capital' City: Creating an Approach to Urban Development in a Monumental City

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Renee Crown University Honors Program at Syracuse University

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ABSTRACT:

Washington DC is the political capital of the country, nestled within a working city. It is under international scrutiny everyday, acting as the face we show the world. A recent development in the center city showed the world our view on future urban development, as the historic Chinatown was completely demolished to make way for new condos and a convention center, leaving a single street for nostalgia. Is this how we should think about our cities futures? As architects, we often become obsessed with the details of our designs, forgetting the larger forces that impact these projects, or that they may have on the areas around them. Instead of being a part of a united system, they act as islands in a sea of infill, separate from the daily life of the people around them. This form of design is unacceptable. Design needs to be approached simultaneously from several different lenses in order to have a positive impact on its environment.

Starting with the formation of Washington DC, the first planned city in the United States, I began to study the different forces that impact the development of a urban center. Washington DC is the result of two antagonistic forces pushing against each other in the form of private economic development and symbolic design. I contended that the best way to approach future development in the city, was to use both these forms of design together, creating a plan that was both financially viable and symbolically significant. To test this, I decided to look at an area in the Southeast of the District. Anacostia and Buena Vista are a larger neighborhood on the brink of development. Most current proposals are either too small to aid the area [bringing some district offices] or too insensitive to the current population [the gentrification of a historically black and low income region]. My particular site in the area is a large block of land which contains the existing metro station for the neighborhoods, as well as acting as a transportation hub for the Southeast. However, due to political issues, it was built a distance away from the actual neighborhood center. I chose to give look at this area, and gave the community something it lacks and needs no matter what income of people reside there, while also promoting both tourism and economic growth. A public market.

It would act as both an attractor to the area, but would also act to feed and employ the current population in a place already easily accessible by metro and bus. It makes the area a destination, as well as a integral part of the daily life of its citizens. But while adding a market may solve the food desert issue facing the region, a single building, no matter how large it may be, cannot solve the issues of an area. Real and lasting change has to happen on all scales of development. To begin to think as a urban designer, I had to first understand the profession and its role in rethinking urban development. Then, using the knowledge gathered through research, I was able to finally think of how an urban designer would begin to approach the neighborhood beyond my particular site. This allowed me to consider how my project would act as just a small piece in a larger project to connect the surrounding areas to the rest of the city with the additions of civic structures, retail, and open space. Yet most importantly, the neighborhoods would still retain the very thing that makes them unique, their character. The end goal was to look at design from all different scales and lenses in order to create an approach to future urban development as cities continue to grow. And with this project, I believe I have created a viable answer.

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PREFACE:

This final product has been the result of a series of parallel studies, each supplementing and aiding me in the comprehension of their disparate parts. And though the study has taken me in many directions, I would like to think that this has allowed me to grow as both a designer and a researcher.

I initiated this project with a simple goal – to think about my future. As a student of architectural design, the opportunities often seem endless. This project allowed me to look at the faults of my field, as well as explore the opportunities that existed in another. I am not an urban designer. It is clear in my preconceptions and prejudices during the design phase of my project. But because of this study, I now feel that I have at least begun to think about the possibilities that considering urban design opens for an architecture student like myself. With the help of Professor Brendan Moran, who encouraged me to open my mind beyond my own field of study, I was able to question the boundaries of a social architecture thesis and, with his help and knowledge, begin to read and see what is urban design.

A main issue I see in the architectural profession is the grand ambitions of talented people stop at the boundaries of a project site. Buildings, as much as we like to tell ourselves otherwise, are not going to change the world. At least not single-handedly. A way of looking at design, through a lens that emphasizes cooperation and understand across disciplines, needs to gain in popularity if architects are ever truly going to make a difference in the lives the people who walk by it every day.

It is the hope of this project to begin to find a solution that allows us to rethink good design on a social scale. Is it the best solution? Perhaps not. But the goal is to get people from all disciplines to start to ask questions, to create conversations about what is the place where we live and exist. And more importantly, how can we make it better.

EVOLUTION OF URBAN DESIGN:

A Study in the Creation of a Discipline

Urban design was far from a new idea. From the Roman grid towns in Europe, to Pierre L'Enfants' original plan of Washington DC, there was an aspiration to design the urban centers that people lived and worked. This desire pushed architects, politicians and citizens to come up with different ways of how the space in which people lived could ease, control, or define their daily lives. But the actual term and profession did not become a part of society's vocabulary until much later on, as a new void needed to be filled in the creation of urban space.

Early attempts at urban design in my project were an experiment in failure. Without an understanding of what the profession was, it was difficult to answer how my project even began to affect the neighborhoods of Anacostia, Buena Vista and Barry Farms. As much as architecture students like myself wish to imagine our buildings rising from the ground to change the world, in reality it is far more complex. To many of us, it can seem cynical, but it is realistic to state that a single building is bound by the constraints of its site. That is why large scale urban planning can seem so attractive to architects. But form, as beautiful and functional it may be, cannot change the world single handedly. It merely provides a setting for change and progress, which need to be initiated simultaneously across multiple fields and disciplines. Urban Design attempts to oversee the

chaos, by bridging the fields of architecture, landscape design and city planning.

But more often than not, the development we experience is the result of hundreds of individual forces, pushing and pulling against each other to create the space in which we live. It can be chaotic, haphazard and confusing, a labyrinth of winding streets and flashing signs creating a setting for the life of its inhabitants. Urban design today acts to attempt and control this chaos, pushing it in a direction that is profitable, socially conscious and functional. Yet it has taken over fifty years to reach this point, since long before the conception of the term 'urban design' by CIAM in 1945. But since the fall out of favor of the modernist agenda, the actual term has undergone debate and transformation, that even its professionals have difficulties defining it.

As a result, though its exact roles are questioned, few question the field as integral to the design process. In the following essay, I explore the origins of the study of urban design, from the McMillan Plan, to the CIAM meetings, to the resulting factions created out of the modern movement, in order to discover the role that it plays today. With this understanding, I can then look at my particular project site, in Anacostia, and begin to think about how an urban designer would approach the same issues I am trying to answer as an architect.

THE EARLY FORMS OF PLANNING

Early forms of urban planning came in the guise of reform. The Industrial Revolution created cities faster and denser than ever before, as populations flocked from the rural farms to the opportunities that these new centers provided. Before planning became an accepted term, attempts to control and study the city were known best as urban reform. Most efforts were acts of sanitary or health improvements in areas unable to sustain the new lives they were expected to support [Petersen 30]. From 1840 to 1890, almost all acts of planning meant cleaner and healthier living, since during this period both industry and retail often concentrated in the center of the city, with residential areas surrounding it. Later the birth of mass transit and then the automobile began to pull the industrial center outward along major rail and roadways, reorganizing the urban center yet again, yet its roots can be found in the 'great city urbanism' of the 1800s [Petersen 12].

Urban planning was the result of several converging lines that came together after 1890. According to Frederick Law Olmsted Jr., these 'streams' consisted of public street platting, sewerage, water supply, parks and civic architecture [Petersen 12]. Early examples of this form of planning include Central Park, by Frederick Law Olmsted in the 1850's, and Baron Haussmann's rebuilding of Paris from 1852-1870. While Central Park acted to improve the health and lives of the future citizens of

Manhattan, Haussmann's plan for Paris was for security and aesthetic reasons. Both were early attempts to use design to create a better environment, but were led by utopian politicians and architects. These were unique examples, however, as most growth came in small spurts, affecting only particular areas of the city. Architecture and building often acted independent of these reforms, controlled by the hands of private developers with little regulation [Petersen 20]. As a result, it was not until the late 1800s that city planners truly took the center stage with the popularity of the City Beautiful movement.

In 1893, a group of architects and landscapers were brought together for the purpose of creating a setting for the Chicago World's Fair [Petersen 1]. It was here that a desire for a unified urban environment finally took shape. Functional, cohesive and beautiful, it became the model for future urban form. The Court of Honor, its large open space filled by a water basin and framed with classical white facades, became the ideal example of what good planning and beautiful architect could do [Petersen 55]. It represented a shift from the picturesque views of park planners, to something more urban. Something grander that would place the United States at the same level as the great capitals of Europe.

The first comprehensive plan in the United States was that of Washington DC. It would encompass its urban core to its periphery, showing the increased confidence of designers in their abilities, and solidifying the nation's capital among its foreign compatriots [Petersen 77].

Through much political maneuvering, Senator James McMillan got his plans for the future of the national capital approved and implemented. With the hiring of Daniel H. Burnham of the World's Fair fame to lead the planning, and including others like Charles F. McKim and Frederick Law Olmstead Jr. to add their own expertise, McMillan's concept became a reality [Petersen 91]. One of the few fully realized examples of the city beautiful movement was created. It was seen as a 'great civic awakening' as the value of beauty gained increasing weight in the public eye [Petersen 124]. And though the actual fulfillment of the original plan can be questioned, or the actual result that the beautification of the city had of its citizens wondered, what cannot be argued is the influence that the plan had of the profession of city planning. Planning became all about comprehensive planning of the city, with Washington DC setting the level of civic attainment desired.

But in most scenarios, city planning was more about dealing with the already built. Urban centers were rarely tabula rasas, waiting for the hand of the planner to give them life. Cities were the result of growth over time. As Olmstead Jr. stated in his introduction to the first meeting of the National Conference on City Planning, "City planning is the attempt to exert a well-considered control on behalf of the people of a city over the development of their physical environment as a whole" [Petersen 2]. The planning movement overcame America, taking form in all shapes and sizes. Some were applications of the City Beautiful and its comprehensive

plans. Other reacted against it, promoting instead the city practical. In the end, planning became an integral part of every urban center's design and future development.

But as city planning became accepted as a profession, it started to shift away from its routes in physical design. Instead, planners began to focus primarily on the scientific approach to the city, favoring economic and political data over design. Their solutions chose to address issues like land subdivision and zoning, thoroughfares and rapid transit, public buildings and parks, and industrial and residential decentralization. Yet they approached these issues through survey techniques and legislation, and not the creative and artistic ways of planning's founders. And though their way of looking at the city became efficient and practical, it created a disconnect between planners and architects who proceeded to design. This void needed to be filled in order for cities to become collaborative pieces of design, but architects, landscapers and planners did not have the ability to cross and connect these disparate disciplines.

THE CONCEPTION OF A DISCIPLINE

The actual moment of conception of the field of urban design is a contested topic of discussion. It is instead the result of several forces converging around the same time, creating from the chaos a discipline to be studied and argued. One of the major forces within this discussion is

CIAM. The International Congress of Modern Architecture first met in 1928, and through these meetings, methods and approaches to urban design and architecture were debated and formulated [Mumford 2]. And though the roots of urban design was appearing in several areas during this period, few were as well know or contested as the ideas brought forth during the reign of CIAM.

The early plans of CIAM were rooted largely in the ideals of the Garden City, with the decentralization of the city became a thing of fascination with most of the designers. How can people live in healthy, productive environments, while still having the access and benefits that city living provides? Early projects were experiments with mass housing. This quickly turned into a comprehensive view of the city as a whole. Interestingly, the goals of early designs by CIAM were politically charged, based on the socialist notion of improving the living conditions of the majority of the population. The idea was to promote these ideas to socialist countries looking to reinvent their urban centers. This would be the basis of judging good design in the early years of the conference. But these plans went beyond the design of housing structures. They also attempted to increase economic efficiency with transportation improvements, while attempting to protect natural environment which was to be set aside for recreation [Mumford 3]. With the meeting of the third CIAM, in 1930, the idea of urbanism became the forefront of discussion

among the designers, as they shifted their focus to one of CIAM's more intriguing legacies: the rational site plan and mass housing [Mumford 4].

It was around this time that a member of CIAM began to tackle the question of urban design through proposals that can be best described as heavy handed. Le Corbusier's Plan Voisin in 1925 and his later work, La Ville Radieuse in 1935, are what most recognize best from the CIAM period. He believed that in order to save the city, it had to be torn down and started anew. The tower in the park, while an intriguing answer to the urban problem created by tenement cities, was often criticized as being insensitive and inhuman [Hall 222]. But Le Corbusier continued to argue the merits of his design, and the purge of the historical city. These infamous plans often overshadowed the other lesser known position within the CIAM conferences. The urbanism that today's designers associate with the conference is often that of Le Corbusier, but the actual discussions of the members went far beyond these artistic yet unrealistic plans.

As the meetings continued, the political stance of earlier CIAM meetings faded with the exiling of several members during and leading up to the war [Mumford 20]. Their design shifted from a political philosophy, to something based more on the betterment of the city as an object and piece of infrastructure. CIAM's form of urbanism became about combining abstract form and new construction to create beneficial urban structures. The designers did this by analyzing the existing social aspects of the city,

its topography and climate, and preparing their solutions under their four functions of design. These functions were dwelling, work, transportation and recreation [Mumford 7]. The city became a 'rational body', as the members of CIAM used design to regain control over an increasingly chaotic environment [Mumford 14]. Later designs took a looser approach to the rational body mentality, as the architects realized that such a strict attitude made actual construction and existence impossible. But CIAM will be forever remembered for its modern approach to the conception of the city.

Where CIAM proved truly beneficial in the growth of the discipline, was the fact that for the first time, the gap between planning and architect was recognized and discussed. The need for a profession that would bridge the gap between architecture, landscape design and city planning became apparent. With the disbandment of CIAM, this realization left the close knit meetings with the former members, and proceeded to be littered around the world in practice and educational classrooms.

DEFINING A DISCIPLINE

The term 'Urban Design' was first used by Josep Lluís Sert at a lecture in 1953 [Mumford 102]. After coming to Harvard after the disbandment of CIAM, Sert reinvented the GSD curriculum. It would later become the basis for future urban design educational programs for many

other schools in the United States [Mumford 102]. What made Sert different from many of his contemporaries was his belief that the issues of the city to be correctable. He wanted to synthesize the collaborative curriculum already in place between planners, architects and landscape designers, with his concept of the 'heart of the city' [Mumford 103]. He saw the core as only one portion of CIAM's urban approach, which focused on the four main functions stated above. Instead of completely redoing the entire city, he found value in the civic core where face to face interaction occurred [Mumford 103]. The scale of man was lost in contemporary cities, and Sert believed in using his role as dean and chair of the architecture school to bring the human scale back into urban design. Along with the importance of the pedestrian environment, was the emphasis on natural environment [Mumford 117]. The GSD helped to popularize the idea of urban design in the United States, and bring it to the forefront of debate and practice, even if everyone did not agreed with modernist approach of Sert and the GSD. Now accepted as a form of study, urban design programs from many other schools of thought have since perforated into mainstream thought as viable alternatives.

In Colin Rowe's *Collage City*, he begins to understand the makeup of the urban center as a series of 'disparate objects held together by various means' [Rowe 140]. They may be physical, or optical, or even psychological, but they are existing [Rowe 140]. He believed that the only way to deal with the problems of the city was to do so in the present day,

and that using a collage approach is the only solution [Rowe 140]. No matter their style or history, just as people assemble themselves based on their own interpretations of traditional values, the city will proceed to organize and accommodate itself. However this has its limits, for no city can be completely hospitable – it is just too ideal [Rowe 105]. Through the acceptance of collage as an organizing factor in urban design, the city will naturally assert itself to create something both functional and beautiful. But this nonchalant look at the city comes across as theoretical, not something that many would put into practice.

So what does an urban designer actually do? According to the theory put forth by Denise Scott Brown and the UPenn school of thought, urban design should not be seen as a geographic boundary, but as an approach to an issue. The education provided should go beyond what was proposed by Sert and the GSD, becoming interdisciplinary beyond the design fields. A good urban designer needed to also have a background in economics, law, and other disciplines that many of the other schools of thought would deem unnecessary [Scott Brown]. These followers of modern urbanism believed that urban design should create order in an increasingly chaotic environment, making Denise Scott Brown's approach unique. Instead, she argues, urban design becomes the "subtle organization of complexity" [Scott Brown]. It is the connector. The actual essence of urban design is about the relationships between objects, the in-between spaces that link our world together [Scott Brown]. The goal of

the urban designer to create and better these spaces. But it is not an immediate solution. Urban design requires patience, as success is measured over long spans of time, with growth occurring incrementally. Good urban design learns from the existing environment and patterns of growth, then embraces and exploits it to create an identity. Scott Brown promoted an educational structure that involved hands on problem solving in groups, and real life experience.

But not all theories popular today see the city as a vibrant center of activity, the place of interactions and connection. The Industrial Revolution restarted the worlds love affair with the urban environment, when the city became the centers of economic gain, political debate, and cultural awakening [Le Febvre]. And just as industry led to the reorganization of the city both physically and mentally, it also led to its reinvention. The city began to infiltrate into the countryside through fashion, etc. The actual physical grouping of buildings was simply the core of a large complex being, constantly in state of change or erosion as new uses take precedence [Le Febvre]. Today that core is less important than it once was. Just like how urban influence has filtered itself across the landscape, so has the basis of power and control. As a result, a new city is forming. The third stage of the city has arrived, when designers and residents attempt to reinvent the urban reality. They push to keep centrality. To hold on to a city that has become a monument to what it once was, a relic [Le Febvre]. But this nostalgia is overriding the changes occurring, as design

attempt to maintain a human scale that no longer exists in the urban environment.

The official conception of the discipline has done little to stem the debates of the true purpose of urban design. It seems to be constantly redefined and edited in order to make it continue to be relevant to today's urban environment. Some take on a nostalgic approach to the city, while others bemoan our attempts hold on to something that is gone. In the end, these different ways of understanding and approaching urban design lead to original answers to the urban question: what is a city? In a way it is an experiment in how the population is supposed to live and interact with their world.

THE CONTEMPORARY URBAN DESIGNER

So where would we find an urban designer in practice today? The generally accepted role is that of a staff member in a government municipality, or as a consultant. They are the reviewers of project proposals for community and special district planning [like university campuses]. Since most urban designers are just that, designers, they can think in three dimensions. This allows for many of them to focus their work on land-use planning. This is because cities are created from more than just buildings. The job of the urban designer is to think what can and will happen in all spaces of the urban environment. To do this, they take into

account political, economic and social points of view, believing that through these lenses they can proceed to create the best solutions. And the best educator is that of experience, since one of the most important traits of an urban designer is the ability to converse and understand people from all backgrounds and fields. Experience makes it easier to get the thoughts of many and conglomerate them into a cohesive design strategy.

URBAN DESIGN'S ROLE IN ANACOSTIA

The question remains, why was it so important to me to gather such knowledge about this profession for my thesis project? What does urban design have to do with a market building in the southeast portion of Washington DC? In the case of Anacostia, everything. On the brink of redevelopment, Anacostia faces the same fate that many other neighborhoods in the district have. Reinvention of a historically prominent and ethnically rich neighborhood threaten to remove the very spirit and character that connect its current residents as a community.

Previous attempts to 'better' local neighborhoods resulted in the complete erasing of the existing population. Chinatown became lost under a series of condo towers and convention centers, while Adams Morgan is a shadow of its original self as it caters to the self-titled hip and wealthy. It is the hope of this project that viewing a smaller intervention, in the form of

both a civic and an economical market space, within a larger context will push me as a designer to ascertain the effects that each design move I make will have on the community. More importantly, I will also see how the urban design decisions I make will affect my smaller building site, as well as the existing culture and population.

Under the modernist approach, the neighborhood of Anacostia would be happily razed in order to make way for a rational grid of housing. Under the modernist theory, there would be no need for an economic intervention, as the functions are separately zoned. However Sert's approach would most likely call for the introduction of a civic center, which would become the space of interaction among residents. Transportation has already undergone a separation of scale, as the parkway and freeway remove fast moving vehicles from the slower, pedestrian streets. But the introduction of another Pruitt-Igoe would act to separate this area further from the rest of the city.

Looking at the existing form of growth, the neighborhood has developed in more or less a main strip on MLK Jr. Street, which proceeds to fade into primarily residential buildings. Following the concepts of Denise Scott Brown, my role as designer is to create and emphasize the linking space. The area of my focus is an 'in-between space' itself, linking historical Anacostia and the metro entrance. The overall urban approach is to make it easier and more desirable for people to move and exist between the spaces. Starting at the metro station, I propose to create a

public market building. This civic and economic monument would act as both a supporting infrastructural piece, and an attracting monument. It would also act as a piece of the 'necklace' of civic nodes that I propose down the length of MLK. Separated from the rest of the context by a similar language of both scale and setback, these civic centers along the main street would act to continue to pull people further, and give pedestrians places of rest. The idea of the node is to exploit the attraction of the monument that is currently used throughout DC: a building in an open square, marked by a monumental marker is something important. Existing at the intersection with historical Anacostia, then again at the intersection between Pleasant St, and MLK, the introduction of public program would become a connecting element. The next would be the metro/market itself. Between these 'squares', retail infill could be promoting through a program which includes benefits for builders and renters. This could lead to gentrification, but by including the neighborhood residents in the process, they could begin to outline what kind of store they believe could do well in the existing neighborhood, and what they needed.

As an urban designer, it is important to design the in-between space as well, so the understanding of the different scales in the street between the nodes of civic architecture is integral. The main scales here, are those of the car, bus and person. By making walking attractive, because it is a main form of transport here, the scale of the car is often

ignored. However, with the introduction of back parking and entrances behind most shops, drivers would have a different experience catered to them.

This is just a beginning, looking at the future of this area through the amateur eyes of an architectural designer. To truly come up with a plan that benefits this area, an urban designer needs to work cooperatively with people in the fields of planning, architecture and landscape design, and also with the residents, vendors and political figures. Through this team effort, this neighborhood might not fall victim to the ravages of private developers. Because when it comes to neighborhood development in lower income areas, requiring special housing just isn't enough to keeping an area both viable and attractive. Our lives do not end the second we walk outside, so neither should our attempts to hold to the existing neighborhood character.

'CAPITAL' CITY:

Creating an Approach to Urban Development in a Monumental City

SUMMARY ESSAY

My thesis project is about how to create a way to approach design that doesn't destroy what makes each individual place unique and interesting. As an architecture major, I was always curious about interdisciplinary collaborations. I see the result of project like that to be interesting and generally more effective. Over the past year, I have completed two thesis projects. One was a series of research assignments, first looking at DC, and then focusing on Urban Design in general. The other was a built project that started to put these ideas into practice.

Urban design was far from a new idea. From the Roman grid towns in Europe, to Pierre L'Enfants' original plan of Washington DC, there was an aspiration to design the urban centers that people lived and worked. This desire pushed architects, politicians and citizens to come up were different ways of how the space in which people lived could ease, control, or define their daily lives. But the actual term and profession did not become a part of society's vocabulary until much later on, as a new void need to be filled in the creation of urban space.

Early attempts at urban design in my project were an experiment in failure. Without an understanding of what the profession was, it was difficult to answer how my project even began to affect the neighborhoods of Anacostia, Buena Vista and Barry Farms. As much as architecture students like myself wish to imagine our buildings rising from the ground to change the world, in reality it is far more complex. To many of us, it can

seem cynical, but it is realistic to state that a single building is bound by the constraints of its site. That is why large scale urban planning can seem so attractive to architects. But form, as beautiful and functional it may be, cannot change the world single handedly. It merely provides a setting for change and progress, which need to be initiated simultaneously across multiple fields and disciplines. Urban Design attempts to oversee the chaos, by bridging the fields of architecture, landscape design and city planning.

But more often than not, the development we experience is the result of hundreds of individual forces, pushing and pulling against each other to create the space in which we live. It can be chaotic, haphazard and confusing, a labyrinth of winding streets and flashing signs creating a setting for the life of its inhabitants. Urban design today acts to attempt and control this chaos, pushing it in a direction that is profitable, socially conscious and functional. Yet it has taken over fifty years to reach this point, since long before the conception of the term 'urban design' by CIAM in 1945. But since the fall out of favor of the modernist agenda, the actual term has undergone debate and transformation, that even its professionals have difficulties defining it.

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order to discover the role that it plays today. With this understanding, I can then look at my particular project site, in Anacostia, and begin to think about how an urban designer would approach the same issues I am trying to answer as an architect. Because it is important to be able to communicate across disciplines, for an easier exchange of ideas.

The hope of this project is to create discussion on how to best approach design in the future. Is gentrification really the only way to save cities? Or is there another way to make where we live and exist a positive part of society. Perhaps, with enough discussion, we can break down some of the invisible barriers that exist between designers and politicians and people. And the result could be amazing.

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