

GOOD Design Bay Area: Solving Six Urban Problems

[Alissa Walker](#) | October 21, 2010 • 8:00 am PDT



You know what they say about designers: They love solving problems. And in San Francisco, they love solving them so much that GOOD was invited back for a second event in which designers attempt to solve the city's problems.

After a successful [GOOD Design SF](#) in 2009, we were delighted to return for the second incarnation of [GOOD Design Bay Area](#). Six design teams from the region were matched with government and urban leaders, who proposed six very different challenges. The designers were then given several weeks to come up with solutions, which they presented to more than 200 attendees. It was a fantastic night full of energetic questions, and was a fitting end to San Francisco's month-long, city-wide [Architecture and the City](#) festival.

Without further delay, here are some of the solutions these brilliant designer-client teams created together.



Our first challenge was submitted by Lisa Frazier, President/CEO of [The Bay Citizen](#), a fantastic new independent publication. She wondered what the role of the public square was in the post-digital city. How do we increase civic engagement when we don't always engage with our neighbors? There were perhaps no better designers to tackle this issue than [Ben Barry](#) and [Lee Byron](#), who are both great graphic designers who currently work at Facebook. Barry and Byron looked at the traditional billboard as an important physical way to see announcements, posting and other information, but wanted to find a way to integrate that with our "virtual billboards," including—of course—Facebook.

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 Thursday, September 9, 2010 at 1:00pm
 3 minutes ago · Comment · Like · Share · Your RSVP: Attending

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 www.paloaltoonline.com
 Palo Alto Online is the online community site for Palo Alto, CA, and includes the online version of the Palo Alto Weekly.
 9 minutes ago · Comment · Like · Share · Promote

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 Palo Alto Online is the online community site for Palo Alto, CA, and includes the

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The Palo Alto Community Wall

Information
 Location:

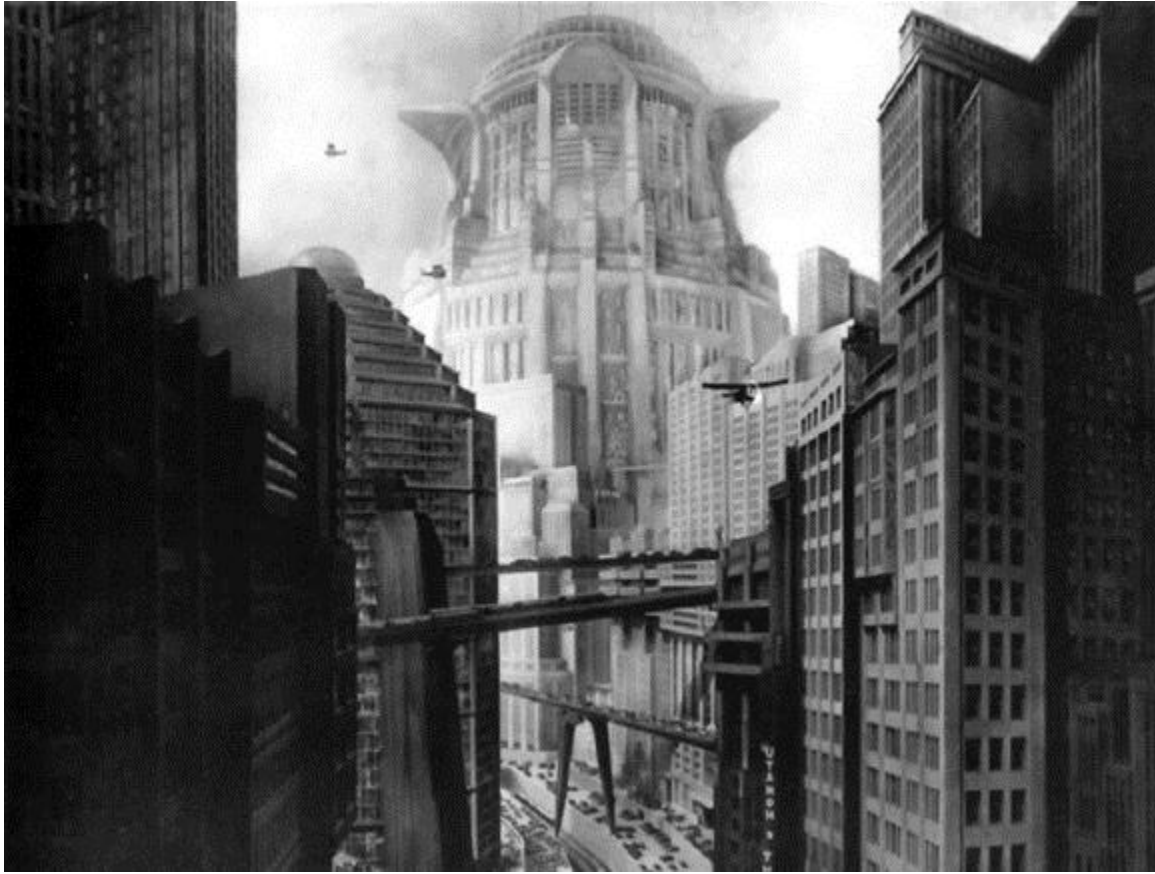
Barry and Byron proposed a system of cross-media billboards that could work in analog as well as digitally. A person could post a flyer physically on the board, but also use a scanner with text recognition that could share the information on digital screens, or upload the information to places like Facebook. The kiosks or walls would then become landmarks in the community which people would locate in real life, but if they wanted to visit them more frequently they could "Like" them to follow updates online. This creates both a hyper-local source of news, and also a way to get a pulse on what a community is thinking—both things that the disappearance of local publications have not been able to replicate.



Molly Sterkel of the [California Public Utilities Commission](#) presented our second challenge: How to get more Bay Area residents to install solar water heaters on their homes. Even though some homeowners know it was better for the planet and that it might be able to save them money, most people are doubtful that the sun, especially in San Francisco, could actually heat up their water sufficiently. So Kate Lydon and Anton Willis of [Civil Twilight](#) focused at the skepticism from homeowners and design solutions that could prove to them that it does indeed work with the campaign "Go Solar." They created "hot spots" throughout San Francisco where solar heaters could provide unique and memorable experiences using hot water. And of course the most prime locations were the chilly beaches on the western side of the city, where solar-powered showers could provide warm post-surf showers.



Lydon and Willis proposed other experiences, like warm-water fountains for children to play in, and pop-up cafes that could be set up in urban areas to show people that, indeed, San Francisco could produce warm, even hot, water from the sun. To the great delight of everyone in attendance, Lydon and Willis presented a concept for "Go Solar"-branded tea bags, which would be given away at the cafes. Coincidentally, a new pilot program was launched in the city where some homeowners were given free solar water heaters and it just so happened that Lydon and Willis were part of the program. It was meant to be.



The issue of density was proposed by a team from development company [Forest City](#), Alexa Arena and Shannon Loew. We all know that density is good for us in an urban sense: It keeps services and people close together, preventing traffic and sprawl. But for many people in cities, especially in San Francisco, the addition of more density is still seen negatively. Forest City wanted to see density reframed as a channel for urban good. Larissa Sand of [Sand Studios](#) first examined our deep-seated fears about density, stemming from dystopic views of the future in films like *Metropolis* (above) and *The Fifth Element*. The real issue, Sand said, was the sense of height: People didn't like the tall buildings that blocked their view and created shade. So she proposed redesigning the spaces between tall buildings to give people more reasons to look up.



By paying special attention to the alleyways and surfaces between the buildings, people would find themselves exploring the buildings and experiencing their height instead of hating it. Sand called for skyways and balconies that would zig zag high up onto the buildings, creating patterns that would shift and change based on where people were located on the street. These would also help frame the sky in ways that would be almost artful. Perhaps most importantly, said Sand, the balconies should be filled with public gardens and terraces that help to assert height as a "green" action. People would be drawn up and into the buildings to experience the beauty of density.



Nader Shabahangi, President & CEO of [Agesong](#) opened his challenge with a lovely poem by Mary Oliver about forgetting. Shabahangi's organization deals with the issues around aging, namely the fact that our population is getting older and older (1 in 5 Americans will be over 65 in the year 2030). Landscape designer Sarah Kuehl of [Peter Walker & Partners](#) was charged with creating a forgetfulness-friendly city where our increasingly senior population can live more safely and happily. Kuehl spent some time with residents of a retirement home and realized that elders are some of the most civic-minded residents in a city: They often give up their cars and walk everywhere. So it was the pedestrian experience, especially around retirement homes, that needed to be repaired.

**NURTURE
AN ELITE FORCE**

TRAINED IN:

- **HORTICULTURE**
- **FORGETFULNESS CARE**
- **CROSSING GUARD SKILLS**
- **POST OCCUPANCY STUDIES**
- **LANDSCAPE METRICS**



Kuehl looked at powerful public spaces for walking like the High Line in New York, which, although they provide great places for people to slow down and reflect upon the process of aging, require a tremendous amount of work. So she proposed a concept called Nurture, an elite force who would be dispatched around the city to help provide maintenance for these green spaces. These volunteers would provide services like horticulture and landscape to keep spaces safe, clean and beautiful for resting and reflection. But they would also stand in as crossing-guards and offer forgetfulness care, should someone need assistance. And due to their dual roles, seniors wouldn't be intimidated or ashamed to ask for help.

*Imagine not
having to drive
to work, but still
getting to work.*

*You can when you're on the Air -
a new kind of bus from the VTA.*



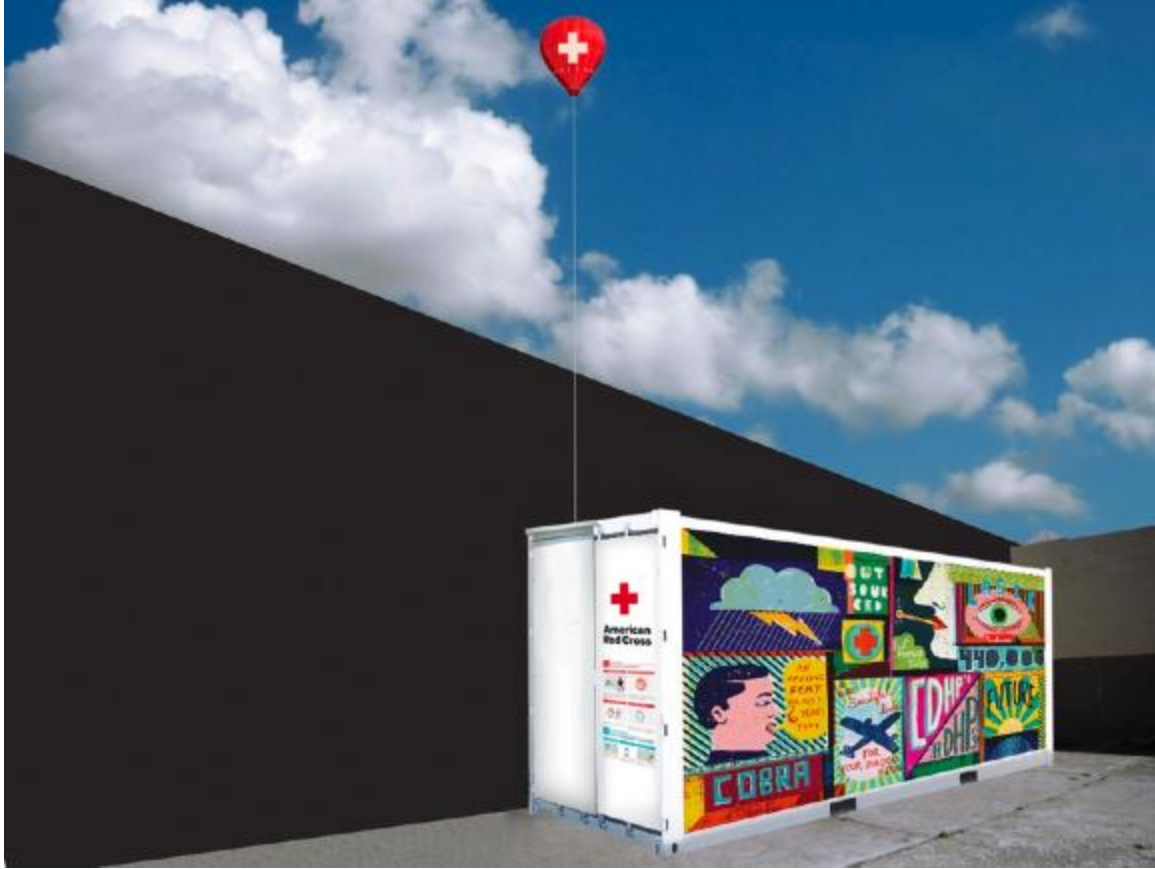
Kevin Connolly of the [Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority](#) had a very interesting challenge that may surprise you: progressive Silicon Valley has some of the lowest public transit ridership rates in the country. Josh To and Dru Truong presented the work of [Brute Labs](#), who tackled the challenge by looking at it from both a business and environmental angle. They looked for the group with the highest opportunity for growth, and that's definitely the business and college commuters who currently drive to their jobs at places like Google and Adobe. Their plan is to get these people on the bus with tech-friendly touches and a message that would help show them riding the bus can actually be a luxury.



First, Brute Labs suggested rerouting the buses into a hub and spoke model that was more oriented to where the commuters wanted to go. This would get people closer to their destinations quicker and allow them to bike the shorter final distance. They also suggested tapping the brain trust of the area to evaluate routes and change them often according to collected data. But the second change was more behavioral: They realized that while those business commuters know the environmental benefits as well as the fact that taking the bus could free up some extra time, they're also affluent people who would happily pay for additional services. So Brute Labs proposed a concierge for bus riders, who could use dry cleaning and postal services, and personal touches like reserved seating, wi-fi, and gourmet snacks so the tech-savvy folks wouldn't feel like they were slumming it.



Madelyn Mackie, Director of Disaster Services at the [American Red Cross](#), began outlining her challenge by asking how many people in the audience had a disaster-relief kit at home. Most people in the audience did not raise their hands, and therein lies the problem. Brian Singer of [Altitude](#) looked at how to better connect residents with disaster relief when the big one hits (or, alternatively, as he noted, for a zombie attack). The Red Cross handles it now by placing trailers and storage units with supplies strategically around the city. However, these can only service 100 people in the first 72 hours, which is not enough for the city, especially in high-density areas.



First, Singer wanted to make more trailers more visible, even in times of non-disaster, perhaps by permanently sitting in school parking lots. When disaster strikes, a balloon could be deployed that would allow relief stations to become more visible to someone on the ground. Smaller emergency pods, which could help provide basic needs to people stranded in urban areas, could be stashed in advertising kiosks, bus shelters and park infrastructure, along with signage and other information about what to do. Pods could also be placed in apartment buildings—Singer proposed a white bin like the blue ones for recycling—and owners could be incentivized to stock them. Finally Singer proposed a massive campaign that would play out on paper grocery bags, reminding homeowners to stock up, but also providing detailed directions on what to do that they could keep handy.

At the close of the program, I was excited to announce that we're launching our next GOOD Design school program in partnership with the MFA design school at the Academy of Art University, right down the street in San Francisco. That will be starting up in the spring, so watch here for updates from talented students. Finally a big thanks to everyone who invited us back! We were thrilled to once again be hosted by SPUR and AIA SF, who sure know how to gather an engaged audience who knows how to ask smart questions. And they also know how to throw one heck of an after-party. Thank you to all the designers and leaders who were involved, and we'll see you at the next GOOD Design!

GOOD Design pairs designers with city problems proposed by urban leaders, and showcases the solutions at lively public forums. Events have been held in [Los Angeles](#), [San Francisco](#) (twice!), [New York](#), at the annual conference of [CEOs for Cities](#), and with [Art Center College of Design](#) and [Ringling College of Art and Design](#). If you'd like to bring GOOD Design to your city or school, let us know!