

VISUALIZING URBAN POLICY

A New Collaboration Between Milano and Parsons

During the Spring term of 2013, Milano Urban Policy students partnered with Communication Design students from Parsons for a series of exciting projects. Parsons students were enrolled in “Visualizing Public Policy,” taught by designer/educator Andrew Shea, while professor Jeff Smith advised the Urban Policy program’s “Laboratory in Issue Analysis” students.

“Visualizing Public Policy” focuses on using design strategies to translate complex public policy into simpler forms so that more people can understand and benefit from the policy. “Lab” is an intensive, double-credit urban policy course in which student teams work for government agencies and nonprofit organizations, analyzing complex policy or management issues and advising their clients on solutions.

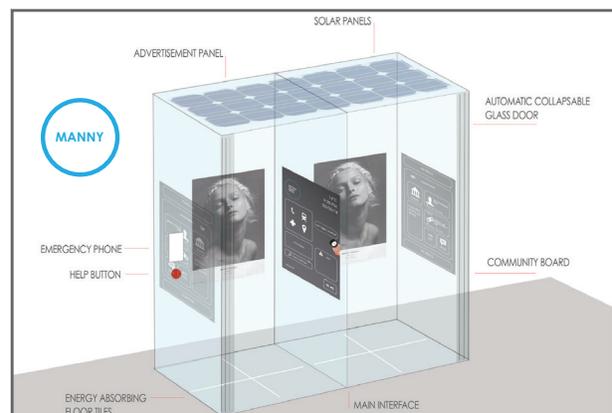
Milano students began each collaboration with a rigorous policy analysis. They then advised the Parsons students who used design to translate those recommendations into visual solutions and for their clients.

The first set of projects was in response to a civic challenge – New York City’s Reinvent Payphones Design competition <<http://reinventpayphones.splashthat.com/>> – whereby teams were asked to imagine the future of the city’s public pay telephone infrastructure. Two Parsons-Milano teams accepted the challenge, and because of the academic schedule had just three weeks to come up with a design. Prototypes were judged on the following criteria: Connectivity, Creativity, Visual Design, Functionality, Community Impact.

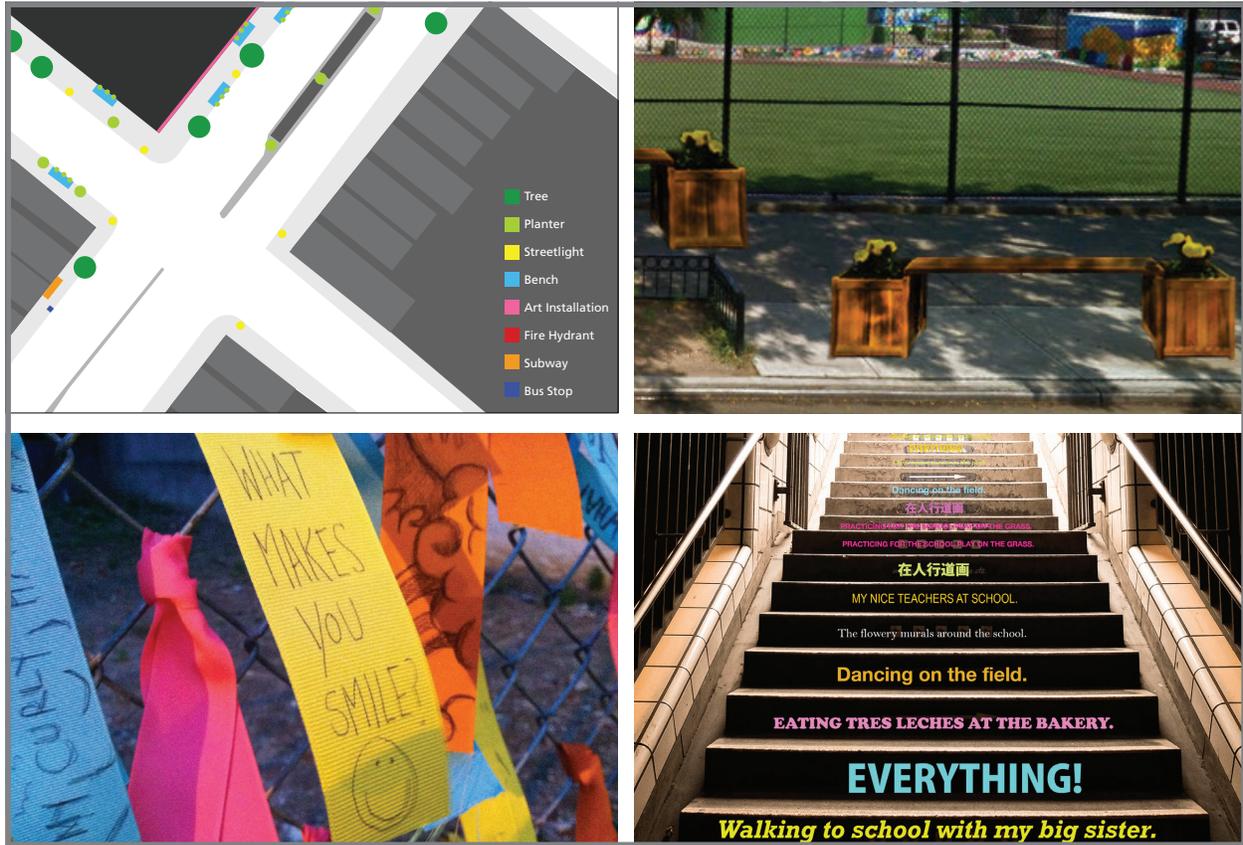
The first Parsons-Milano team created “Look Up!,” a mini-park designed to create an experience that summons people to stop looking down at their phones but rather look up and connect with the city. The physical design evokes a tree, with perennial New York City greenery sitting on its roof. Technologically, the structure is designed to connect with the local community by featuring local art on its interface and providing a wealth of local business and volunteer information within the local communities.

The second team developed MANNY, a technologically advanced design that integrates innovative renewable energy features as well as “Manny”, a virtual assistant that helps users navigate the interface and maximize the interactive experience. MANNY sought to transform the ways in which citizens think about connecting to each other and their governments by incorporating emerging concepts in participatory governance into its design.

Despite competing against approximately 150 other entrants – most backed by large corporations and major design houses – both Parsons-Milano teams were named to a group of 11 semifinalists, and formally presented to a citywide panel of judges at a crowded event hosted by Quirky and the New York City Department of Informational Technology.



Upon the completion of the payphone project, Parsons and Milano students embarked on a pair of new design challenges for real-world clients: first, to develop a community service project for Brooklyn's Red Hook Community Justice Center (RHCJC) <<http://www.courtinnovation.org/project/red-hook-community-justice-center>>, and second, to conceive a new hiring hall for El Centro del Inmigrante <<http://elcentronyc.org>>, a Staten Island group assisting undocumented immigrants. For both clients, Milano students initiated a rigorous policy analysis and then worked with Parsons students on execution of the policy recommendation.



RHCJC is a project of the Center for Court Innovation, which in its role as the New York court system's independent research and development arm creates demonstration projects that test new ideas. RHCJC is the nation's first multi-jurisdictional community court which hears neighborhood cases that would normally go to civil, family, or criminal courts; RHCJC may offer sanctions such as community restitution projects or long-term treatment (e.g., drug treatment, mental health treatment, and trauma-focused psychotherapy) rather than more punitive sentences (i.e., prison).

In keeping with RHCJC's mission, the RHCJC team pursued restorative justice by devising a beautification project along 4th Avenue in which youth offenders as well as two neighborhood elementary schools in the neighborhood would participate. Leaning on academic research relating natural greenery and public art to a reduction in aggression levels and crimes ranging from burglary to shooting, the team forecast an increase in pedestrian safety and a drop in neighborhood crime levels upon project completion. "It was a pleasure working with the team. We appreciate their hard work, and it will be put to good use," said Jessica Colon, RHCJC Deputy Director.

El Centro's mission, meanwhile, is to provide for the economic advancement and well-being of immigrant workers and their families until all immigrants achieve full civic participation. In working closely with El Centro, Parsons students identified more pressing organizational needs than the hiring hall, and El Centro agreed. Consequently, Parsons students worked with Milano students to help rebrand and reposition El Centro in the community, presenting the organization with an arresting new logo and other branding materials which El Centro quickly adopted. Julie Behrens, an El Centro consultant who oversaw the project, noted that the student team brought a unique and valuable perspective in helping clarify El Centro's vision.



While this was the first time Milano and Parsons collaborated in this way, everyone agrees that it was a success. Parsons' students learned how policy analysis can inform their design approach, while Milano students were able to visualize their policy recommendations. Shea and Smith plan to continue the partnership in Spring 2014.