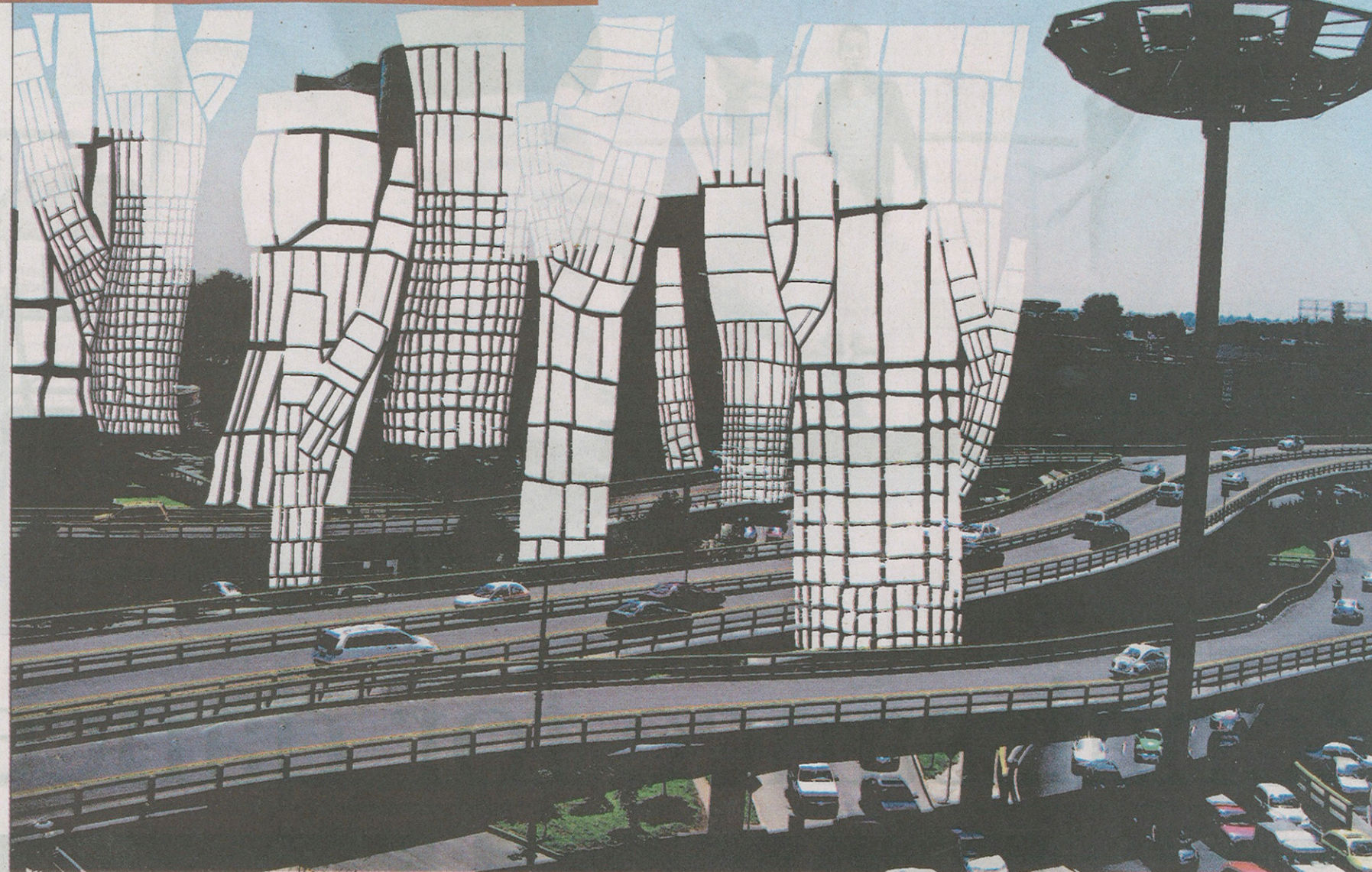


arts & entertainment

DESIGN



White, treelike buildings humanize a brutal stretch of elevated highways in Matali Crasset's "Spring City in Mexico." COURTESY OF THE GALERIE THADDAEUS ROPAC, PARIS/SALZBURG

New frontier

'Hyperlinks' explores cutting edge meeting of the digital, spatial

As all computer geeks know, a hyperlink is a word or group of words that you click on to jump to a related document. Yet a provocative new exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago argues that a new kind of hyperlinking is under way — not online, but offline, in the homes and other places we inhabit every day.

Architects and designers are blurring the boundaries between their once-separate disciplines, using new technologies and materials to transform the landscape. And their designs are more playful and people-friendly than the ones produced by such exchanges in the past.

These are among the big ideas of the visually arresting, often entertaining, but not entirely persuasive exhibition called "Hyperlinks: Architecture and Design."

Its organizers — Zoe Ryan, the museum's curator of design, and Joseph Rosa, the Art Institute's former chief

curator of architecture and design (he now heads the University of Michigan's art museum) — have gathered a wealth of material from avant-garde architects and designers around the world.

Imagine bioengineered mushrooms that would provide insulation between densely packed apartments. "Hush-rooms," they are called. Or space capsule-like homes that would allow the eco-minded to live off the power grid? Or a kitchen in which the walls transform into virtual screens and keyboards that help you brew a cup of tea?

It all sounds very sci-fi, but there's just enough real material in "Hyperlinks" to keep us from rolling our eyes. One of my favorites is an inventive response to the dangers of riding a bike on city streets, especially at night. Two Massachusetts-based designers, Evan Gant and Alex Tee, attached a lighting device to a bike's seating post. The gizmo uses green laser lights to project two lines with a bike symbol onto the street — in effect, a virtual bike lane.

All but two of the show's 33 projects are displayed in the handsomely proportioned architecture and design galleries of the Art Institute's Modern Wing. (One of the outliers occupies an adjacent gallery while the other resides in the wing's outdoor garden.) The projects are loosely grouped by theme. Even the windows that offer a view onto the wing's atrium are put to use — a surprise because curators typically despise windows, thinking them to be distracting.

Here, the windows are outfitted with a switchable transparent film consisting of myriad triangles. As Chicago's famous winds blow outside, a sensor tracks them and translates them into



The "Hyperlinks" exhibit includes "Confessions," by Arik Levy, inspired by traditional Catholic confessionals.

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ever-shifting patterns of light and dark on the film. Called "Shade" and designed by London-based Simon Heijdens, the installation reveals how nature can challenge the blandness of the built environment with a little help from software.

As long as the show sticks to this interplay of the digital and the spatial, it is intriguing and unsettling.

Digital renderings from Paris-based Matali Crasset suggest how a cluster of white, treelike buildings could humanize a brutal stretch of elevated highways. Farther on, in a project by Montreal-based Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, a surveillance camera records passersby and projects pixelated images of them

onto a screen, using color palettes including four shades of green from the original Nintendo Gameboy. Museumgoers standing in front of the screen playfully twist their bodies and wave their hands, perhaps not realizing the project's darker meaning — how such cameras help the authorities maintain control over public space.

But the show turns weak when it strays from its main theme. We are introduced, for example, to a pink-covered book that reveals 185 products — among them beer, heart valves and cigarettes — made from a single pig. This is old news to Chicagoans who remember the slaughterhouses where "everything but the squeal" was put to



LightLane, by Evan Gant and Alex Tee, attached a lighting device to a bike.

commercial use. And what does it have to do with the interchange between architecture and design?

Even some of the furniture in the exhibition, such as a pair of chairs inspired by traditional Catholic confessionals, lapses into cultural commentary, talking about the world rather than transforming it.

More troubling is the show's cheerleading for architects who work at a wide range of scales, from furniture design to urban planning. There's nothing inherently wrong with that. But when a building is made from profiles reminiscent of a jigsaw puzzle, as in the work of one Berlin-based architect shown here, we risk considering works of architecture solely as art objects, losing sight of their primary role as shapers of the public realm.

Perhaps it's easier to go from architecture to furniture than furniture to architecture. A suite of architect-designed pieces suggests as much.

Inspired by the latest in sailcloth technology, bucket-like chairs from Los Angeles architect Greg Lynn seem to float in the air, at once strong and lightweight. Made from recycled paper and plastic, L-shaped units from Japanese architect Shigeru Ban form everything from benches to a table. Then there's Los Angeles architect Herman Diaz-Alonso's voluptuous, Batman-black chaise lounge, a twisted, computer-designed play on Ray and Charles Eames' classic 1948 chaise lounge.

Only time will tell whether these new works can match the staying power of such modernist masterpieces. In the meantime, "Hyperlinks" gives us a lot to think about — and a mostly scrumptious visual feast.

"Hyperlinks: Architecture and Design" is on view at the Art Institute of Chicago through July 20.

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