Making Urbanized.

By Steven Heller

Gary Hustwit has released the final film in his design trilogy, *Urbanized*. The first, *Helvetica*, was a surprise hit, focusing in minute detail on one of the world's most ubiquitous typefaces. His follow-up, *Objectified,* took a stab at explaining product design's incredible impact on everyday life. *Urbanized* takes a similar route in explaining how city planning forms and reforms human existence. After seeing the premiere of *Urbanized,* I asked Hustwit how the trilogy came to pass.

Did this project start with the idea of a trilogy?

No. When I was making *Helvetica* I had no intention of making two more design documentaries. But once I'd completed that film and started touring around the world and screening it for audiences, the ideas for the two other films started percolating organically. I liked the idea of exploring these other areas through the documentary form, using a similar approach to what we'd used in *Helvetica*. I liked the world we created in that film, the ideas and music and visuals. So I guess I wanted to hang around in that world a little longer.

With *Helvetica,* you covered a very micro topic in a macro manner. With *Objectified,* you took on a broader swath, trying to explain industrial and product design and the controversial issues associated with it. With *Urbanized,* you've built up to an even more global theme and have ostensibly "crowd-sourced" the positions laid out in the film. Did you have a plan as to how these narratives would play out, or did you let your research determine your point of view?

Even with *Helvetica,* I let the interview subjects determine the point of view. I'm not a designer or an architect; I'm just curious. I want to know how and why these people do what they do, and how it affects my life. And it's the issues that these people think are important that end up guiding the narrative of the films.

I've heard criticism that with *Helvetica* you effectively carved out and introduced the public to a subject they live with everyday but is invisible to them.

But with *Objectified* and now *Urbanized,* you had a harder time because each theme was so large. What would you say to that?

I still think the design underlying these larger subjects is invisible to most people. And arguably the design of our cities is the one area of design that has the most impact on our daily life. So with *Urbanized,* even if I can get a few people to think differently about their cities and the reasons they're shaped and work they way they do, then I think it's a successful film.
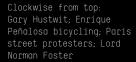
With *Urbanized,* the shock of how we live and how it is planned and unplanned really carried the film. Was your message to shock? Are you telling us that urbanization is evil?

No! I think the film has actually made me more optimistic about cities. But in a sense, they're sort of the problem and the solution. The challenges that come from more people living in one place, whether it's housing or social equity or dealing with traffic and mo-

Clockwise from top:
Gary Hustwit; Enrique
Peñalosa bicycling; Paris
street protesters; Lord
Norman Foster

Facing page: Alejandro
Aravena in front of the
Lo Barnechea project

"We have to come up with better ways of living together in large numbers. We don't have a choice. The type of thinking I witnessed around the world in the projects we feature in the film gave me hope that we can meet those challenges through design."—Gary Hustwit, filmmaker

bility issues or sustainability; these issues can only be addressed through the kind of mash-up of interests and creativity that cities enable. We have to come up with better ways of living together in large numbers. We don't have a choice.

I enjoyed many of the "stars" you interviewed in the film. Enrique Peñalosa, the former mayor of Bogota, was fabulous, and his solution for mass transit was inspired. How did you determine who your "voices" would be?

I spent about six months before we started shooting just researching and talking to people in the field—architects, policymakers, academics. I first saw Enrique speaking at the Urban Age conference in Istanbul in 2009. During a break, I happened to see him preparing his PowerPoint slides before his talk, scrolling through them on screen. My first thought was, 'This is going to be really

boring, just static images.' But then he started his presentation, and I was completely blown away by his passion and his ideas. It didn't matter what images he was showing, he was just on fire, and I decided at that moment that he needed to be in the film. Capturing people speaking about something they're passionate about; that's been the real goal for me with these films.

All your films, and with the exception of a photo of Jane Jacobs, are steadfastly about the here-and-now. You do not use documentary footage or vintage images, which are such a mainstay of documentaries. Why not?

On one level, I'm really not interested in making historical documentaries. I enjoy watching them, but I'd rather focus my work on what's happening in the world right now. As a documentary filmmaker, I feel my biggest responsibility is to record this

moment in history and try to make some sense out of it.

If you had to do any of these films over again, is there anything that you would change?

No, I don't think so. They're sort of personal travelogues for me; every frame reminds me of a trip or a conversation I've been able to be a part of. Sometimes I wish I had bigger budgets. Maybe it would've been faster and easier to make the films with more resources. But taking years to make each film, sort of piecing the story and the production together organically as we go, gives me some time to gestate the ideas we're presenting. And even spending two and a half years on a movie about cities isn't nearly enough. I could have easily kept going. We're just scratching the surface in this film, just trying to start conversations. It's up to the viewers to get involved in shaping their cities and to explore these ideas further. ❧