

ARCADE

DIALOGUE ON DESIGN

\$8 FALL 2016

Issue 34.2

Architectures of Migration

*A Survey of Displacements,
Routes, and Arrivals*

FEATURE EDITOR

GREGORY T. WOOLSTON

INFO FEED

Poverty, Inequality, and the Seattle
Minimum Wage Experiment

CHAD P. HALL AND KAREN CHENG

PRACTICE

Understanding the Divided City:
An Interview with Wendy Pullan,
Centre for Urban Conflicts Research

BUILD LLC

PERSPECTIVE

How Making Chocolate Is like
Building Software

CALLIE NEYLAN

A Bridge to Somewhere Important

How the UW Light-Rail Station Transformed an Intersection

CHARLES TONDERAI MUDEDE

I MUST BEGIN by pointing out the function of beauty in bike and pedestrian infrastructure. It is not just a matter of aesthetics, nor is it about moral improvement, as in the City Beautiful understanding of things. Rather, beauty presents one of the most effective social engineering tools a planner can use to transform our mental conceptions about transportation. The human is a social animal—one that constantly reads his or her surroundings (the human world) to see what is and is not valued, what is and is not honored, what does and does not make us look good to others. And so it is with sidewalks, bike-ways, and infrastructure of that nature. If we see these things as neglected or designed in a half-baked manner, we assume that our society has a very low opinion of them and their users. An ugly sidewalk makes you an ugly pedestrian.

To quote the popular former mayor of Bogotá Enrique Peñalosa: “A [beautiful] bikeway is a symbol that shows that a citizen on a \$30 bicycle is equally important as a citizen in a \$30,000 car.” We cannot underestimate the importance of this understanding—what does design show or tell citizens? People want to do what they perceive is respectable.

And so it is with the admirable new pedestrian bridge that links the superb new University of Washington light-rail station with the southwest corner of the school’s campus. It is a work of beauty—it embodies simplicity, grace, and an aristocratic indifference to the horrible traffic that often clogs this section of Montlake Boulevard. When you leave the station and look south, you see cars going nowhere soon, and in the distance, below a tangle of traffic lights that seems to be making matters



worse, the UW Medical Center. Turning to the north, you see the pedestrian bridge rise and smoothly span above it all. It’s a bridge you want to be on because you like yourself, and you like to be liked, and you like what you see, and like likes like.

Three teams made this bridge and its site a success. The work on the campus side of Montlake Boulevard was a collaboration between GGN (landscape architects) and KPFF (engineers). The bridge itself was designed by LMN Architects, who also designed the station, which, in my opinion, is the best on the line. Swift Company designed the UW station site.

The station’s site design is integral to the project’s beauty, as it leads your eye north to the bridge the moment after you look south in despair at a congested mess of cars. Bringing your gaze around you see features such as the concrete seat wall, site furnishings, and an elegantly austere arrangement of plants and lighting, all guiding you toward a better way (a ramp or the steps).

“We were very mindful not to fight the [bridge’s] desire line,” explains Gareth Loveridge, the project manager for Swift Company’s contribution to the bridge. “We wanted to work with the desire line, enhance it ... It’s what captures the eyes and tells the person this is the way they want to go. They feel they want to go there. You do not want to waste your time doing this. You want to do that.” Later he says: “[The bridge and the way we saw the project] is about knowing where you are and where you want to go. It’s very clear and direct. The gentle arch that leads this way to [the other side], the sweep, the views you expect to find.”

The site is also set to become forest-y. Swift Company is very excited about this leafy future. They planted 10 oaks and, indeed, the project they set into motion will not really be finished until they are fully grown. And these trees take their own sweet time—oaks can live for 300 years—“but in 20 they will have an impact,” promises Loveridge.

Again, all of this is just adding beauty to a work of pedestrian and bike infrastructure. This is what matters most. The concern, the thoughtful work by all involved to make the site as desirable as possible. People will not miss it. They will want to be part of it. We all want to be beautiful.



Photos © Swift Company

Charles Tonderai Mudede is a Zimbabwean-born cultural critic, filmmaker, and the film editor for the *Stranger*. Mudede collaborated with the director Robinson Devor on two films, *Police Beat* and *Zoo*, both of which premiered at Sundance, and *Zoo* was screened at Cannes. Mudede has contributed to the *New York Times*, *LA Weekly*, *Village Voice*, *Souls* journal, *CTheory*, *Cinema Scope*, *Keyframe*, and *Filmmaker*, and his fiction has appeared in the *Seattle Review*. He is on ARCADE’s editorial committee and the editorial board for *Black Scholar*. Mudede has lived in Seattle since 1989.