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People Powered | Istanbul Design Biennial

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There are few places more perfect to weigh the value of imperfection than Istanbul. And imperfection is the theme of the [Istanbul Design Biennial](#), Turkey's first, which is organized by the Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts and runs through Dec. 13. It consists of two separately curated exhibitions; together, they feature work by more than 300 designers and architects from 46 countries, and catalog the richness and increasing ubiquity of ad hoc design.

In Istanbul, it is common to see freshly washed carpets drying in the sun, clipped to a wall by the legs of what is, essentially, an improvised "clothespin": one of those plain, plastic outdoor chairs familiar the world over. Although some things are dictated top-down in Turkey, design isn't one of them. "Istanbul has been carrying design in its genes for centuries," says Emre Arolat, one of the biennial's curators and a second-generation architect, "but combining the words 'design' and 'Istanbul' is new."

Arolat and his fellow curator, Joseph Grima, the editor of the Italian design magazine [Domus](#), have pulled together projects from Monrovia, Liberia to St. Lamsbrecht, Austria, among other spots around the world. Grima's exhibition, "Adhocracy," fills the neo-Classical rooms of a disused 19th-century school whose windows look out onto crumbling domes. But it illustrates the ways that advancing technology - like micro-manufacturing tools, Kickstarter-like platforms or hacker culture - is shifting design away from corporate, factory production to grass-roots projects by artisans, activists and amateurs. Indeed, Mathew Ho and Assad Muhammad, two Toronto teenagers with \$400, some Styrofoam, a modified weather balloon, a parachute and hand warmers, sent a Lego man into space this year, recording the journey with an ordinary point-and-shoot camera. And a film on the roof of the school documents how, over the course of a year, UX, an underground Parisian collective known for its stealth restoration efforts, secretly repaired the Pantheon's long-broken clock - and were promptly, and unsuccessfully, sued by the government.

"Adhocracy" is a living exhibition, a lab that puts projects into practice. For example, Street Food Printing, an initiative by two Spanish architects, a Spanish chef, and a Turkish architect, is 3-D printing with cheese and chocolate. The Belgian design office Unfold is represented by Stratigraphic Manufactory, which it calls "a new model for the distribution and digital manufacturing of porcelain," and Kiosk 2.0, in which Unfold will ply city streets with a vendor's cart, digitally printing objects on demand. But the show is also the most detailed depiction thus far of how, instead of finished products, design is increasingly offering templates, kits of parts, loose instruction manuals and consultation. For instance, one exhibit

looks at farmers and scientists in Maysville, Ohio who operate an open-source database of machinery components, the Global Village Construction Set, that can be assembled by almost anyone with a toolbox and the need for, say, a tractor.

Across the boulevard, in a dim warren of rooms at the Istanbul Museum of Modern Art, Arolat's exhibition does not provide the tidy white space and clear-cut solutions that Grima's does. Like his subject, it is chaotic and layered. Entitled "Musibet" (Turkish for "difficult experience"), it refers to the saying that "One musibet is worth a thousand pieces of advice." Arolat welcomed his first visitors at the threshold of a replica of a jail door: "Now this depressing space is the entrance," he said. "Everything is not bright and shiny." Inside, cramped circulation necessitates spontaneous negotiations among viewers, while exhibits like "40 Nasihat" describe the "adocracy" native to Istanbul, listing lessons to be learned from inhabitants who design the city each day - with carpet clothespins - for better or worse.