

Super Cool

Architectural outfit Superpool use good design to solve social issues



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PROFILE THREE Istanbul, Turkey

From its white-washed cuboid base on the banks of the Bosphorus – more of which later – architectural outfit Superpool use good design to solve social issues. A case in point is their launderette project in the predominately Kurdish city of Diyarbakır, 100km from the Syrian border. A spate of young female suicides caused the city municipality and a team of campaigners to act. By creating a network of free launderettes, the project allowed thousands of often internally displaced women to group, discuss issues and learn about their social rights while washing their laundry, away from the suspicions of male family members.

Superpool's Women's Guide to Diyarbakır – co-authored with local collaborators – is a socially active map created for these newly urbanised women. With clean lines and colour-coded keys, it unlocks a city for those who rarely stray a few blocks from home. By mapping launderettes alongside cultural activities, counselling clinics and education programs, it has given the city's women a sense of community as well as the self-confidence to survive.

With its good deeds prerogative, Superpool must be a happy place to work. Upon entering their office, a polyglot chorus of 'hellos' rings out as German, Polish and Turkish staff swivel away from their Macs in welcome. Indeed, English is the office language, although agency co-owners, Denmark-born Gregers Tang Thomsen and his Turkish wife Selva Gürdoğan, could converse in several others besides. To add to the happy family feel, their infant son snoozes in a toy-filled pod behind the office filing system.

Thomsen and Gürdoğan have design pedigree behind them. They met at the Rotterdam HQ of Rem Koolhaas' OMA – the world's coolest architecture and urbanism firm – before heading to the firm's New York bureau. 'But after five years in the machine,' says Thomsen, 'it was time to set up our own practice.'





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Several design-led cities were initially considered as a Superpool base, including Copenhagen and Dubai. They settled on Istanbul, but not entirely for commercial reasons. Five years ago the (Turkish) economy was promising,' explains Gürdoğan, 'but wasn't really delivering on that promise.' Then they struck lucky. By the first quarter of 2011, Turkey became the fastest growing economy in the world. The private sector began throwing money at cultural and architectural projects, including new art institutions and a tunnel under the Bosphorus Straits.

For Thomsen, 'Istanbul was also a greater challenge, a much less defined space.' The lenient planning laws and sheer inventiveness of what is the largest city in both Europe and the Middle East held an attraction for Gürdoğan too.

Indeed, one of Superpool's first projects was borne less out of commercial sensibilities, more out of getting happily lost during their first few months in town. With an architectural statement in mind, they decided to map out the route plan of Istanbul's minibus network. These omnipresent transports serve a city of 15 million and are aptly known as dolmus – from the word dolma, or stuffed.

The resulting map was startling. The plan clearly didn't describe the classic city shape of Istanbul's historic centre and Bosphorus. Instead it sketched a settlement that stretched along the Sea of Marmara, with a series of mini-centres dotted all the way up to the Black Sea. 'The less it's visualised the less it's cared for,' says Gürdoğan. 'Our comment is more along those lines.'

What did the municipality think of the dolmus map? 'We mailed several copies,' says Gürdoğan, but the official reaction was cagey. 'We tend to think the new Metro map they have in the city's trams looks very similar,' she says, tongue-in-cheek, 'so we like to think that we inspired them somehow!' Despite controversies, the project did win them interest from a very influential source. The Garanti-bank backed art institution, SALT, were intrigued by the map and wanted to do something on a similar, societal level. They sat down with Superpool and envisaged not just one map but 70. Thomsen takes up the story:



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Women's Guide to Diyarbakir

Many internally displaced people seeking refuge in the historic city of Diyarbakir in the 1990s were suffering a traumatic urbanisation experience due to inadequate housing, lack of services and domestic violence. It led to a high suicide rate among young women so the municipality offered assistance. By providing a free laundry service, the project managed to overcome cultural boundaries and male suspicion. They later expanded to a network of five laundries with additional programs, including libraries, kindergartens, and workshops. Superpool created the Women's Guide to Diyarbakir and mapped these laundrettes thus adding to the social structure of the city



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You see the downfall of not having studio-based training in Istanbul

Selva Gürdoğan



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"They said "I would love to see where all the Starbucks are," then "I want to map out where the public hospitals are."

Their resulting publication, Mapping Istanbul, visualises everything from bicycle usage to mortality rates. By overlaying several maps, solutions to city issues are easier to address. For example, Istanbul's street markets single out nodes of communication across the city. "This is exciting because it points to the importance of small businesses," says Gürdoğan, "like local food vendors or the lady selling herbs." If clumsy urban planning destroys these buds of daily commerce, everything from local transport to society will suffer.

More alarming reading is the cartography that encompasses Turkey as a whole. The maps show that air and long-distance bus routes are tightly channelled through the Istanbul-Ankara axis and down the touristy western coast. In the rest of Europe and Asia many transport routes run to trade-heavy borders, but along Turkey's Arabian frontier there are almost none.

For Gürdoğan, some of the standard of living maps 'bring tears to my eyes.' Data-derived plans showing everything from university graduation figures to the number of doctors per population mass are unmistakably skewed from the rich west to the poor east. Set out on a series of unarguably clear maps, Turkey's far eastern province of Hakkâri on the Iraqi border seem shockingly deprived. In the right hands, these maps could be powerful ammunition as a force of change.

Superpool designs and installations can now be seen at SALT Beyoğlu and SALT Galata, Istanbul's two massive contemporary art venues, both of which opened in 2011. They also designed the UAE Pavilion at the most recent Venice Biennale, which featured three independent artistic voices looped around a series of half-cylindrical white walkways. The exhibition curated by SALT's director of research and programs, Vasif Kortun was characterised by odd shapes and sharp lines, causing visitors to stop and reflect as they wandered through.

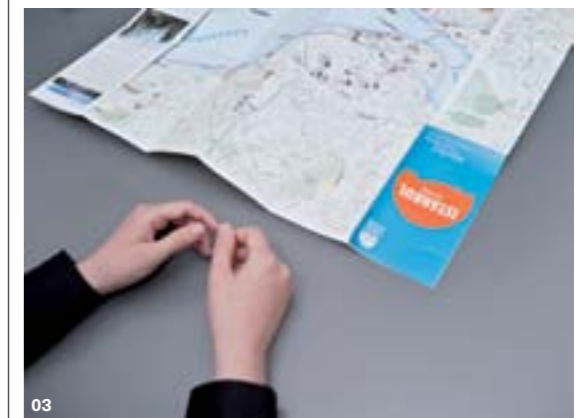
So, do the Superpool pair see any barriers in the quest to

change the world by visual design? They both cite regional problems in the education system. Abroad and in the West, training tends to be more studio-based says Gürdoğan, claiming that 'you see the downfall of not having that here in Istanbul'. She was educated for three years at Istanbul Technical University but when she moved to Los Angeles' SCI-Arc architecture school, she saw a completely different side. It's an issue that concerns Thomsen too. In his opinion, when you take away studio interaction from a designer's education, 'you only learn from a tutor and what you can come up with yourself.' This becomes a problem if 'you don't see that the guy sitting next to you is designing in a completely different way.'

Perhaps there is some way to go before their way of designing becomes commonplace in Turkey and beyond. 'After all, it's not like you can go into a final [university] presentation and pick your students,' concludes Gürdoğan. Maybe one day further afield, a whole generation of architects and urbanists would hope Superpool picks them.



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01 They have collaborated with many regional outfits

03 Mapping Istanbul, one of their biggest projects

02 Gürdoğan puts social concerns top of the list

