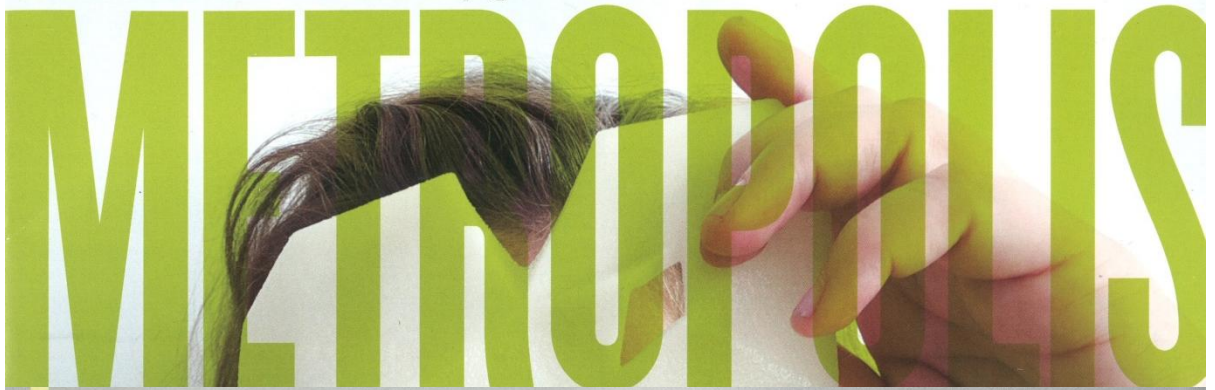
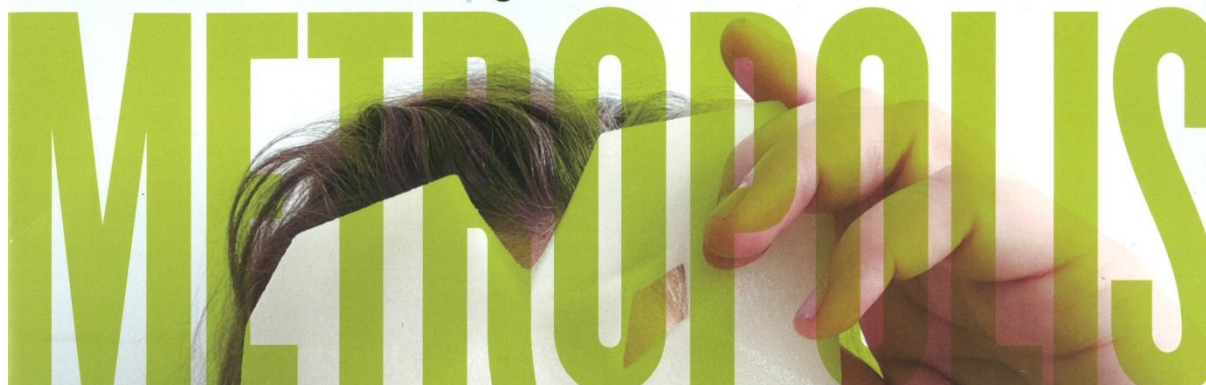


METROPOLIS



AN AMERICAN TUNE





Jan and Marica Vilcek's remarkable immigrant story provides the inspiration for their foundation's annual awards honoring young foreign-born scientists, artists, and designers.

BY MELISSA MILGROM
PORTRAIT BY ROSS MANTLE

Jan Vilcek, the 80-year-old microbiologist and philanthropist, works on East 73rd Street in Manhattan, three blocks and 4,300 miles away from his home. His current abode is an elegant apartment on Fifth Avenue filled with the works of Georgia O'Keeffe, Stuart Davis, and other American masters, but his homeland is Slovakia, which he escaped 50 years ago.

Vilcek is 5'5" and neat, with silver hair and earnest blue eyes. Today, he wears a crisp pink dress shirt under a burgundy sweater vest in anticipation of Valentine's Day. He is humble and precise, neither cold nor effusive. His Slovakian accent is as faint as his smile, both of which contain and reveal the unfathomable story of a displaced person who led a miraculous life far from home, and who is now trying to make miracles for other immigrants.

With more than 45 patents to his name, Vilcek is also the coinventor of Remicade. If medicines were hit records, then that anti-inflammatory drug would be Michael Jackson's *Thriller*—a hugely popular classic that brings in \$8 billion a year. For his scientific research, his compassion for those both similar and different from him, and his philanthropy that enriches the United States, President Barack Obama awarded him the 2013 National Medal of Technology and Innovation. "The medal is in a drawer," Vilcek says modestly. "It's not easily framed—it's on a ribbon."

In his ninth decade, he has the stamina of his twenty-something staffers. He teaches at New York University (NYU), publishes research in biomedical journals, and runs the same lab at NYU's Langone Medical Center that he established in 1965. He is



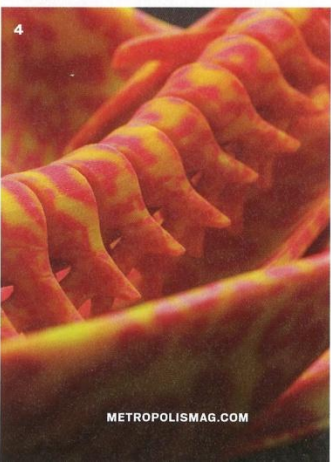
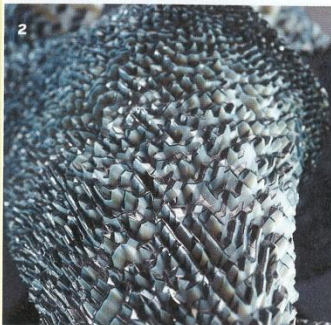
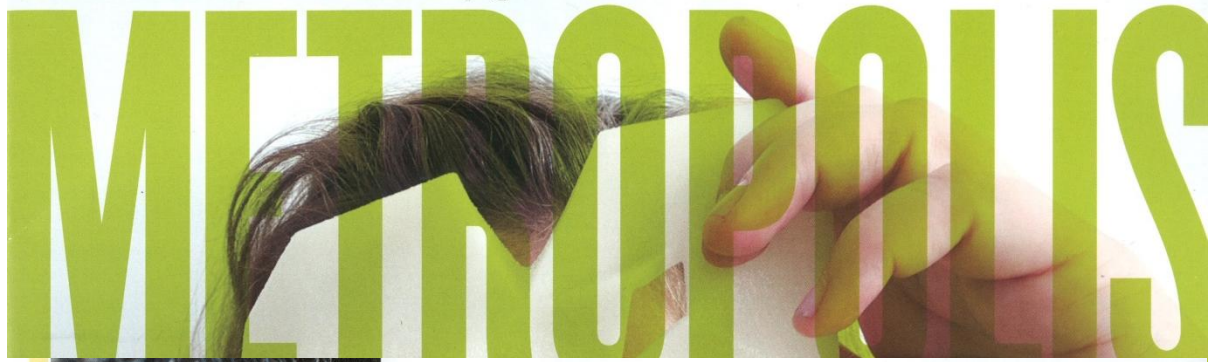
also, with his wife of 52 years—the art historian Marica Vilcek—a humanitarian of uncommon vision and generosity. In 2000, he set aside a percentage of his future Remicade royalties to start the Vilcek Foundation, which supports the work of scientists and artists who have resettled in the United States. "They have a broad sense of rewarding the young people who try new things in science and the arts and who had the opportunity to leave their own country to discover their own identity," says his friend Christo, the environmental artist who fled Bulgaria in 1956.

The foundation awarded eight prizes this year to foreign-born Americans: four in biomedical science and four in the arts (two Vilcek Prizes of \$100,000 each; six Creative Promise prizes of \$35,000 each). Whereas the science category is always biomedicine, the arts category changes yearly. The first year, 2006, it was fine arts, followed by architecture, and then classical music, filmmaking, cooking, literature, dance, and contemporary music. This year's category is design.

After 50 years in America, Vilcek understands how an immigrant's past and present entwine. Money and time do not erase the never-ending psychic transition from vulnerability to safety. In 1939, when Vilcek was five, Hitler invaded Czechoslovakia, in what

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Opposite page: Marica and Jan Vilcek, at the Vilcek Foundation offices in New York City. The foundation awards eight prizes a year to foreign-born Americans: four in biomedical science and four in the arts. This year, for the first time, the arts category honored design.

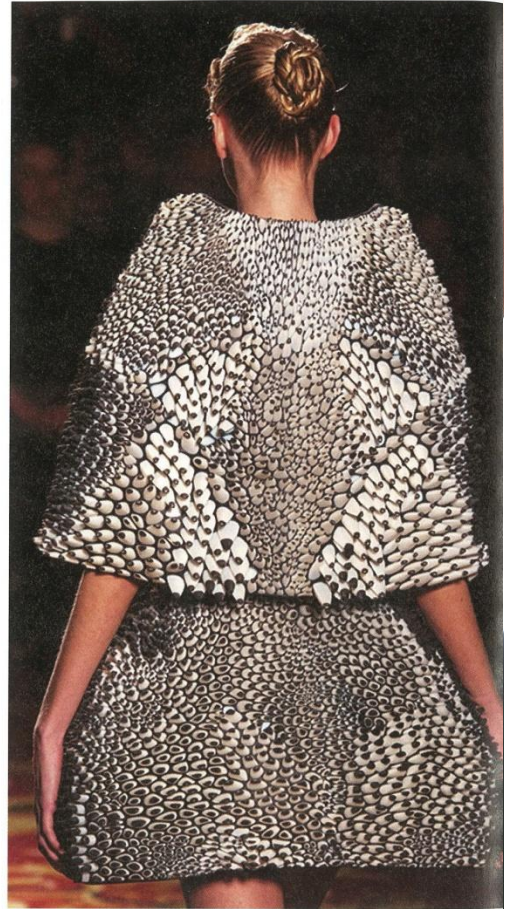


The Vilcek Prize in Design

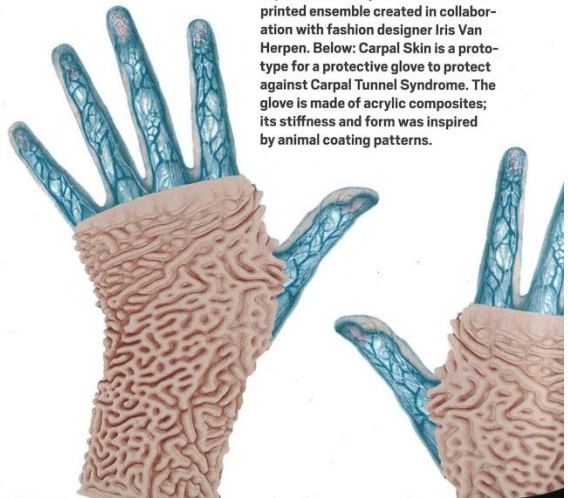
NERI OXMAN

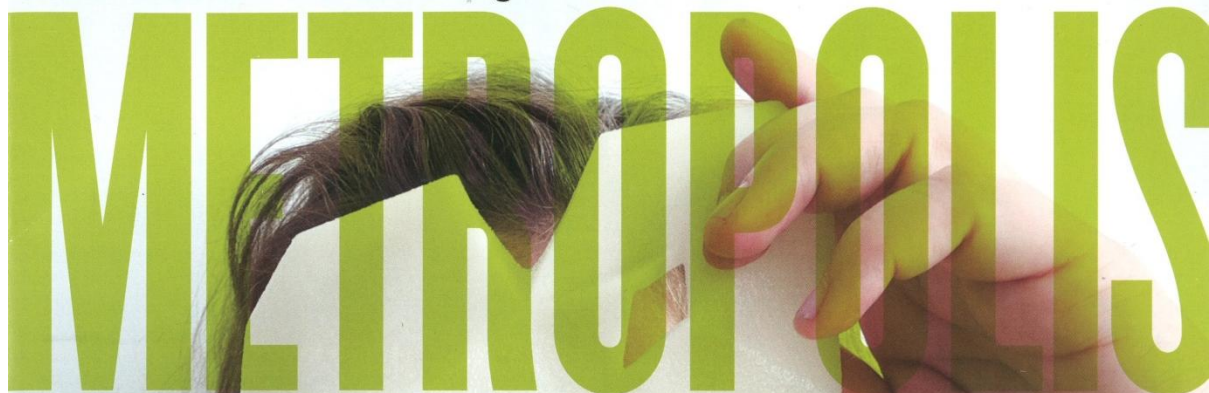
Oxman believes that the processes and patterns inspired by nature—what she calls “material ecology”—provide a road map for the future. Her projects include a silk pavilion that uses silkworms to spin the canopy. Drawing from her training at Hadassah Medical School in Jerusalem, Oxman studies, for instance, the spongy formations in bones, to create organic forms that can be 3-D printed or machine made. “Oxman strikes me as someone with firm roots and tastes as a naturalist, and with a talent and passion for employing advanced technologies to capture the strengths and beauty of nature and design living environments like no one has done before,” says renowned cancer researcher Joan Massagué. For Oxman, all colors exist in the gray of ambiguity. “To be able to live a full life in Israel, one must live at relative ease with situations of social and personal ambiguity. It is a country filled with contradictions and ideologies, but it is also where I experienced my childhood. Design, too, is about finding clarity where there appears to be none, and creating experiences and solutions that seem inevitable once they are created.”

Top to bottom: All four projects are from a 2012 Centre Pompidou exhibition entitled *Imaginary Beings: Mythology of the Not Yet*. 1) & 2) Doppelgänger; 3) Daphne (a prosthetic knee socket) 4) Kafka (a flexible corset).



Top: Althozoa: Cape & Skirt is a 3-D printed ensemble created in collaboration with fashion designer Iris Van Herpen. Below: Carpal Skin is a prototype for a protective glove to protect against Carpal Tunnel Syndrome. The glove is made of acrylic composites; its stiffness and form was inspired by animal coating patterns.





CONTINUED FROM PAGE 71 is now the Czech Republic. Educated Jews (Vilcek's mother was an ophthalmologist), the Vilceks hid before the Nazis could send them to die in Poland or Germany. "We were persecuted during World War II," he explains with great reserve, in the conference room of the foundation. "In 1942, more than two-thirds of Jewish people

"I couldn't go out," says Jan Vilcek of his years in Slovakia, "but Westerners came in, so I found out what was going on in the rest of the world."

were taken to concentration camps and most of those people perished," he says, pausing. "My grandmother was actually sent to a concentration camp in September 1944, and she perished. My mother and I lived with a peasant family who took us in and that's how we survived. My father joined the uprising against the pro-Nazi government and he managed to literally walk to the front line and join the Russian army."

The next year, when Vilcek was 11, the war ended, and he and his mother reunited with his father. The Vilceks resumed life in Bratislava under a democratic regime. Three years later, the Communists overtook Slovakia and "people escaped in many different ways." Living behind the Iron Curtain was restrictive, but Jews could survive if they obeyed orders. "At least we weren't singled out as enemies or victims," Vilcek says. "I wasn't in love with the Communist system, but I could go to study and go to school and get a second degree." After he graduated from medical school, he earned his PhD from the Institute of Virology at Slovak Academy of Sciences, but could not leave the country and had to turn down a fellowship in London. "I couldn't go out, but Westerners came in, so I found out what was going on in the rest of the world."



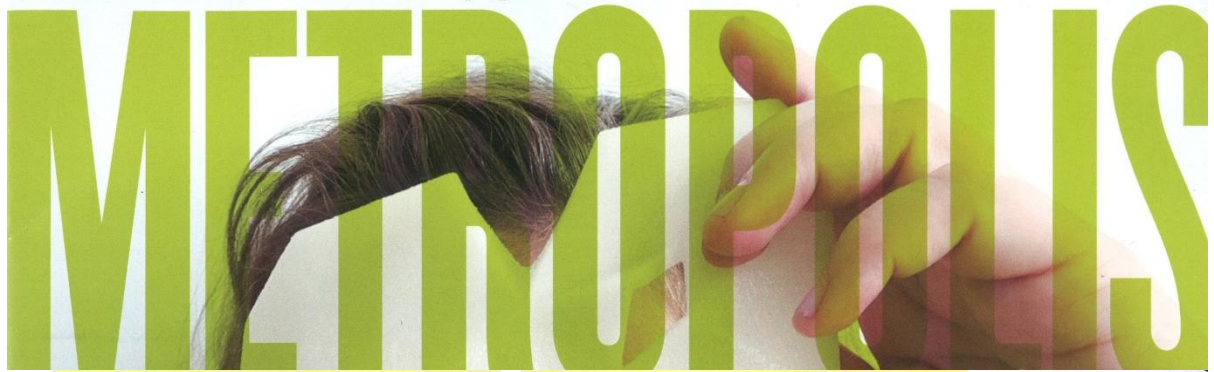
Marica, too, yearned for freedom. They had met one Easter through a mutual friend. Slender, blond, brainy, and a head taller than him, Marica speaks with a terse tenderness that calls to mind Greta Garbo in *Nimotchka*. "We met, parted, and that was that," she says. Soon after, she spotted Jan wandering through the Slovak National Gallery where she worked. That was that. They married in 1962.

Unexpectedly, a scientist invited Jan and Marica to Vienna two years later to see *The Magic Flute*. There, they decided to defect to West Germany where they applied for, and were granted, U.S. visas as political refugees. "We left illegally," Marica says. "We didn't tell my father because the secret police would visit him and it was better for him not to know." CONTINUED ON PAGE 74

To Reach by artist Hongsock Lee on the roof of the Vilcek Foundation in New York City. The piece was commissioned by the foundation in 2008.

This page: Ross Mante. Opposite page: portrait courtesy Noah Kalina, all others courtesy Neri Oxman





CONTINUED FROM PREVIOUS PAGE As traitors, they faced prison sentences if they returned to Slovakia. Jan was sentenced in absentia to five years in prison; Marica got three. "They confiscated our property," she says. "My brother was sent to the salt mines. That's how Communism worked—they took it out on your family."

In 1965, Vilcek set up his lab at NYU and, as he told the *New York Times*, learned how to apply for this thing called a grant. Cut off from family, dressed in pointy, out-of-style shoes from Hungary, and unaccustomed to basic things like Fahrenheit thermometers, he buried himself in work, seven days a week, which made the transition bearable. "When he got his first paycheck, his shoes went down the garbage dump!" Marica says with a smile.

In an essay about her own migration she wrote: "I was not leaving a supportive family structure or a network of close friends, and I had no feelings of national belonging. Leaving became synonymous with hope, inexplicable and unsure, and oh-so alluring. But as I was soon to discover, rejection is not simply a matter of walking away."

"We came with nothing as refugees," Jan says today. "We had some hand-me-downs and nothing of value. We had two suitcases." Striking out on their own in a foreign country, they found solace in art and science: she at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and he at NYU. Jan's biomedical research led to the development of a drug for the treatment of inflammatory diseases. Huge royalties followed. Soon they could buy artworks like the ones Marica cataloged at her job at the Met. The couple now owns one of the world's premier collections of American modernist paintings. "We had more means than we could spend on a comfortable life, so we started to give some back," Jan says. "Why don't we recreate our own experience and shape the foundation? We felt happy with the concept and felt we were doing something that was unique and helping the U.S."

Given his own profession, Vilcek knew that the foundation would fund biomedical science; it took longer to commit to supporting the arts. That's where Marica came in. An art historian who spoke several languages, she felt most at ease at the Met, where she

worked for 32 years, accessioning objects. "The museum was a tight-knit place and I never considered myself an immigrant or a refugee. In the museum, it didn't matter." This, combined with a desire to counteract the anti-immigrant sentiment stirred up in the wake of 9/11, formed the impetus of the art prizes.

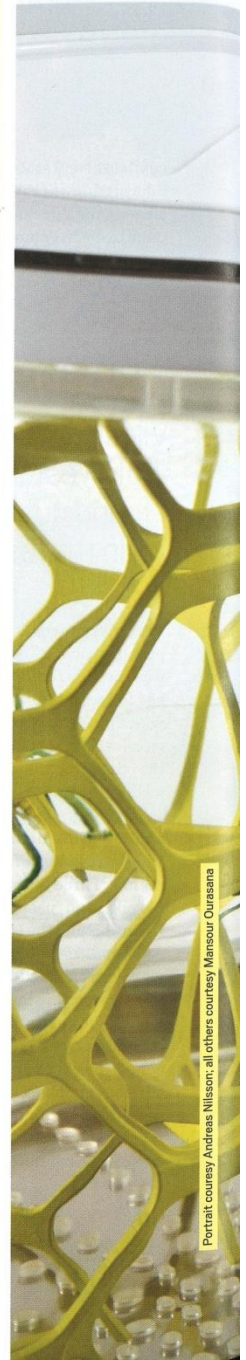
Vilcek knew that the foundation would fund biomedical science. It took longer to commit to supporting the arts.

Sitting at a long table in the foundation's conference room, Marica, in a navy knit suit and a red silk blouse, exudes a prim businesslike air until she mentions her friends the Christos. "They started every single day at breakfast saying how lucky they were to be living in the United States. They had no money. Once a police car parked in front of their apartment, and they thought they were coming to arrest them. They achieved a tremendous amount coming into this country, with tremendous difficulties in the beginning."

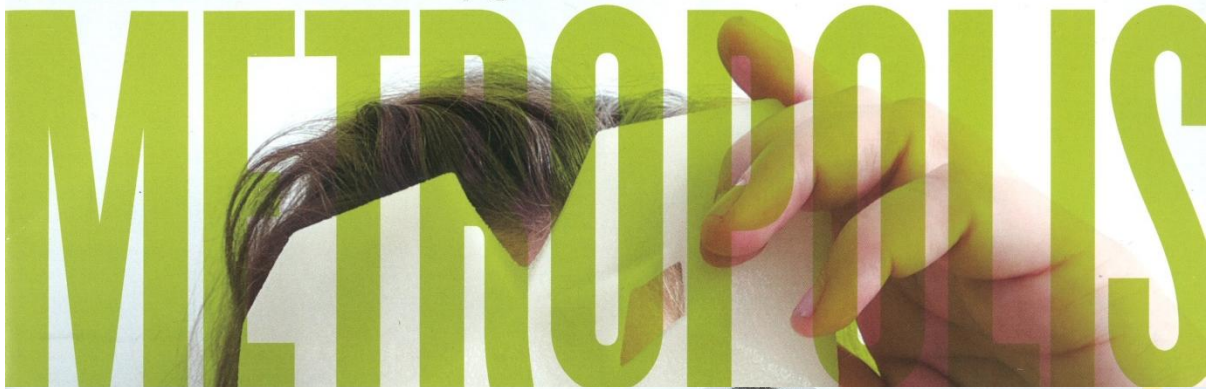
In 2005, from the window of her apartment, Marica watched *The Gates* rise in Central Park, a sunrise of orange fabric brightening a city still suffering in the shadow of 9/11. These refugees were healing millions of people with art, much like Jan has done through his scientific research.

The next year, the Vilceks no longer held business meetings at their breakfast table; instead, they bought the townhouse on East 73rd for the foundation headquarters. In an office between Jan's and Marica's sits Rick Kinsel, the foundation's executive director—the literal and conceptual midpoint of science and art. A curator, Kinsel worked with Marica at the Met. Kinsel trained at

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Portrait courtesy Andreas Nilsson; all others courtesy Mansour Ourasama



The Vilcek Prize for Creative Promise in Design

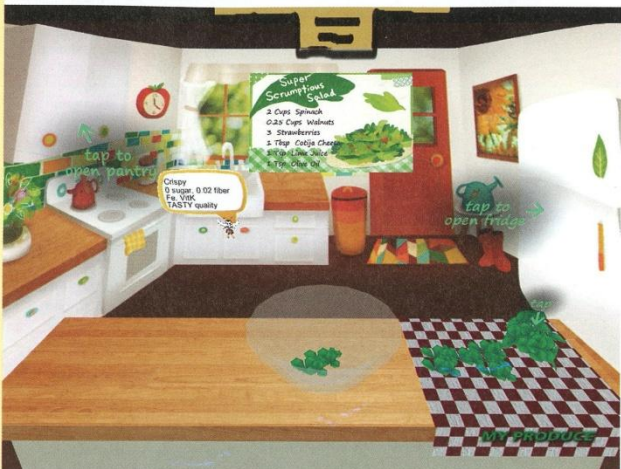
MANSOUR OURSANAH

"I grew up in Togo, West Africa, and there wasn't a lot to eat," 28-year-old Mansour Oursanah says with a big laugh. "So eating insects during rainy season was OK." He moved to New York in 2001, when he was 16, to join his parents who had immigrated there years earlier in search of a better life. He shopped at his first grocery store and ate his first meal at McDonald's. He was amazed at the abundance and repulsed by the waste. He had never seen people throw away food before. The recipient of a *New York Times* scholarship, Oursanah attended the University of Notre Dame where he discovered design by accident. He disliked engineering, bypassed architecture because he couldn't afford to study in Italy, and ended up in product design—later earning his master's at the Umea Institute of Design in Sweden. There he addressed the problem of world hunger and overpopulation with his innovative kitchen appliance, a sleek terrarium for breeding edible grasshoppers. "I had nothing to lose by embracing America," he says. "But what if I'm not African anymore? What about when I go back home? This award says it's OK for me to grow up in Africa and be a different type of designer. It gives me the boost of confidence that says that it's OK that I didn't spend my first 16 years in America."

To combat world hunger, the West African-born designer created a terrarium for breeding edible grasshoppers. The project was realized in collaboration with KitchenAid.



METROPOLIS



Clockwise from top left: Hashemian testing a game; the designer holding a Virtual Reality trophy card for Virtual Sprouts; the kitchen in that game; and a Kinect-controlled game for children with ADHD.

The Vilcek Prize for Creative Promise in Design

YASAMAN HASHEMIAN



Yasaman Hashemian grew up in a family of girls encouraged by progressive parents to pursue their passions in an Iran hostile to women. A daughter of a physician father, Hashemian displayed symptoms of ADHD as a child. "In Iran they don't pay attention to children with ADHD," she explains. Now an interactive-media producer who teaches at University of Southern California, her prototype video game, *Adventurous Dreaming Highflying Dragon*, uses repetition and dynamic storytelling to improve the lives of kids with ADHD, ages six to eight, by teaching them body control and, in turn, self-esteem. "I want them to have the skills for life," she says. "This is not just a game. I broke a lot of things when I was a kid and I had to become aware of my whole body movement. The game resembles the life journey of ADHD for many kids and the victory at the end of the game makes sense, too. You can become a hero. There is no failing in the game."

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 74 Bard and the Louvre and is a recipient of the Museum of Arts and Design Visionaries Award. Hyper-attuned to cultural trends, he works on curatorial time, planning future categories four years in advance. He also selects the juries. "I want jurors who go beneath the surface of the field," he says. "This year we have prize winners who are the future—the bull's-eye of what design is now and in the future." Still, he adds, "If two winners are equal in their accomplishments and one had a hard life, we give consideration to that."

"We opened the category up and we ended up with winners who cross genres and didn't really fit into any traditional categories," says Rick Kinsel.

This year's design winners don't manufacture stainless-steel-and-leather chairs, or, as Kinsel jokes, objects made from coconut fibers: "We opened the category up and we ended up with winners who crossed genres and didn't really fit into any traditional categories." The big winner of the 2014 Vilcek Prize, Neri Oxman, is an Israeli-American who studied medicine and architecture before earning a PhD in design computation from MIT. Her current work at the MIT Media Lab uses patterns and processes found in nature (such as coral reefs) and high-tech digital fabrication (such as 3-D printing) to emulate environmental plasticity. She calls it material ecology. Three other designers won the Vilcek Prize for Creative Promise. Iranian-born media designer Yasaman Hashemian produces video games to combat obesity and help kids cope with ADHD; her empathetic strategies and spirited visual narratives have already garnered support from Michelle Obama. Quilian Riano, an architect from Colombia, uses design, urban planning, and community organizing as

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The Vilcek Prize for Creative Promise in Design

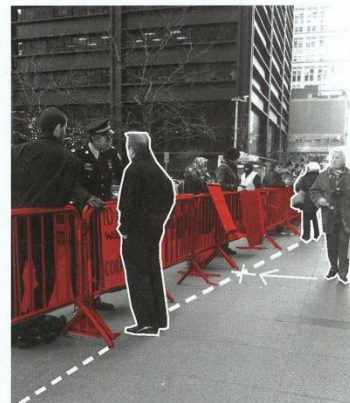
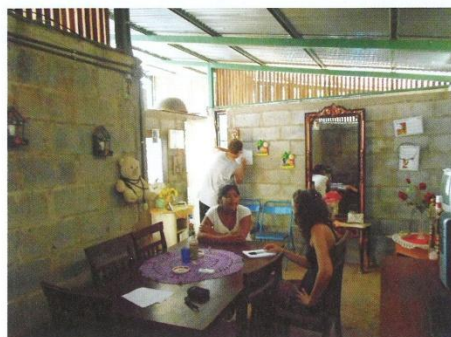
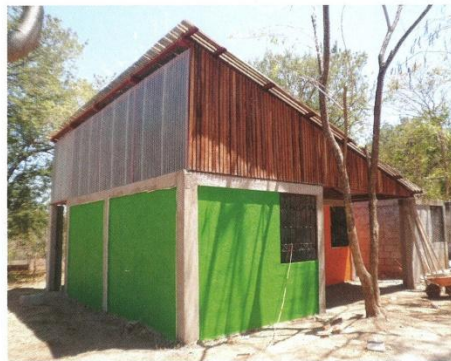
QUILIAN RIANO

Colombia-born architect and “design activist” Quilian Riano—a professor at Pratt Institute and Parsons with a degree from the Harvard Graduate School of Design—uses design as a tool to fight for underserved communities. DSGN AGNC (Design Agency), his Brooklyn-based architecture and planning firm, asks: How do spaces that were once public become privatized? How do neighborhoods bisected by highways organize to fight back? Who intervenes to build decent schools, homes, transportation, water treatment plants, and parks for those who can’t self-advocate against developers and government authorities? “Design is the nexus of conflict resolution,” he says. “We become facilitators who leave behind the tools for the community to push these processes forward. Many times, those tools are architectural.”

Riano grew up in the low-income Latino neighborhood of Hialeah, Florida. He had fled Bogota with his mom and sister when he was 12—trading drug cartels for gangs. “We moved from one violent context to another,” he says. “Coming from a place where you felt you didn’t have a lot of agency to change things made me question how things work.” Today, he embraces an urban design centered on people. “Of course, communities like Brooklyn change,” Riano says of gentrification and power. “But who has the agency? As an immigrant, I can’t be against change. I am change. The question is how do you even those odds with that power dynamic?”



Top: Corona’s Plaza was a research project for a working-class neighborhood in Queens, New York. Below: Conducted in the wake of Occupy Wall Street, #whOWNSpace? looked at the phenomenon of privately owned public space.



Top left: A housing and community-design project in Granada, Nicaragua. It was done in collaboration with Estudio Teddy Cruz, Simon Bussiere, and the 2011 Ball State University Landscape Architecture Studio. Left: The interior of one of the houses.

This page: portrait courtesy Susan Surface; all others courtesy DSGN AGNC. Opposite page: courtesy Yasaman Hashemian