

Million Dollar Blocks (Spatial Information Design Lab, 2006)

Of the more than two million people in jails and prisons in the United States, a disproportionate number come from a few neighborhoods—typically low-income communities of color—in the country’s largest cities. In some areas, the concentration is so dense that states are spending in excess of a million dollars a year to incarcerate the residents of single city blocks. Using rarely accessible data from the criminal-justice system, the Spatial Information Design Lab and the Justice Mapping Center have created maps of these “million dollar blocks” and the city-prison-city-prison migration flow in five of the nation’s cities. Shown here is the map of Brooklyn, New York. Zeroing in on the Brownsville neighborhood, the data visualization bears witness to the fact that, as the project statement outlines, “on a financial scale, prisons can be said to be the predominant governing institution” in these million-dollar neighborhoods.

Steven Pinker

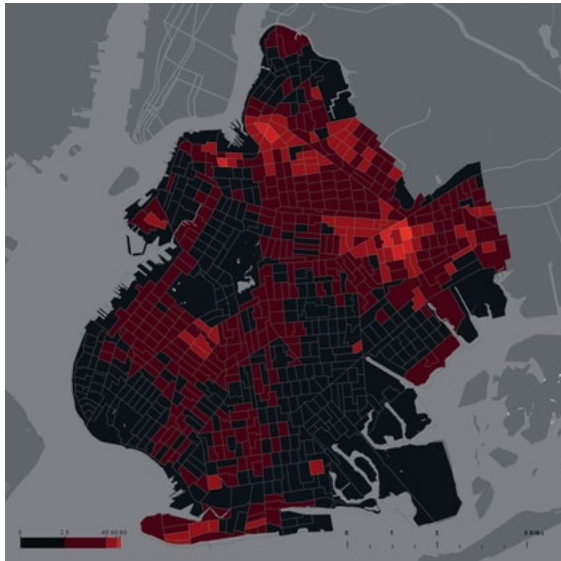
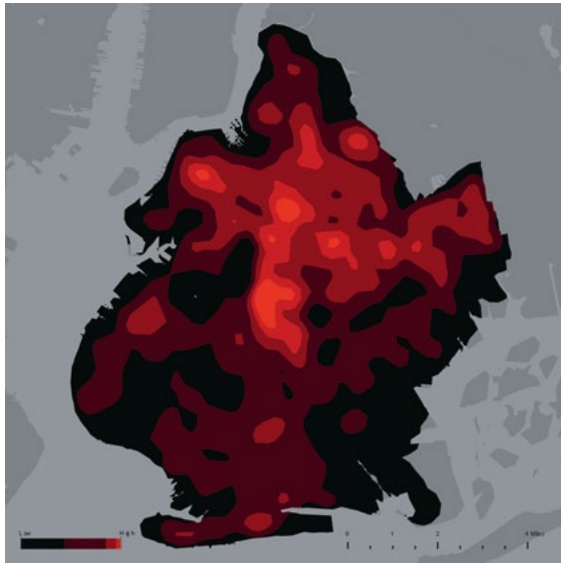
Information graphics have been given a bad name by *USA Today*. Many people think of them as ways of tarring up a trend of the day, as a bit of frivolous eye candy. Nothing could be further from the truth. Our ability to understand the world depends on grasping complicated relationships among variables—how people, money, actions, power, things, and qualities are distributed in space, how they vary in time, and how they affect one another. The human brain did not evolve to do such complex calculations. But we are primates, with almost a third of our brain devoted to vision and visual cognition. Translating complicated relationships into visual formats is a way to co-opt our primate neural circuitry to meet the demands of understanding our world. And it is a challenge in which the creativity of artists, graphic designers, and other visual thinkers is essential. We have made do with standard graphical formats—pie charts, line graphs, organizational charts, and so on since the eighteenth century, if not earlier. We need to figure out how to use the resources of the page and the screen—shape, contour, color, shading, motion, texture, and depth—not only to channel data into brains, but also to reveal subtle relationships as visual patterns.

Nowhere is this need more apparent than in the understanding of violence. Murder, rape, assault, and robbery all shot up in the 1960s, then came crashing down again in the 1990s, and no one really understands why. Most analysts believe the American imprisonment boom had something to do with it, since people behind bars cannot commit crimes on the street. But it’s clear that long ago we reached diminishing or even reversing returns: we throw far too many people in jail for far too long. Knowing the right amount of criminal punishment—enough to keep rapists off the streets, but not so much that it ruins lives and communities and diverts resources from more productive uses—is the kind of multidimensional challenge that common sense is ill-equipped to handle. Million Dollar Blocks (a collaboration between the Justice Mapping Center and the Spatial Information Design Lab that maps the flow of prisoners in five major cities and highlights the blocks in which the annual cost of imprisoning its residents is higher than a million dollars) forces us to grasp the social and economic costs of overimprisonment in a way that no list of sentences or table of numbers could do.

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Laura Kurgan (South African, born 1961),
Eric Cadora (American, born 1962), David
Reinfurt (American, born 1971), and
Sarah Williams (American, born 1974).
Spatial Information Design Lab (est.
2004), Graduate School of Architecture,
Planning and Preservation, Columbia
University (USA, est. 1881). Architecture
and Justice from the Million Dollar Blocks
project. 2006. ESRI ArcGIS software



Q: Seeing is believing. Can information graphics alone clarify reality and influence policy?

COMMENT 1. Farai Chideya:

As someone who lives in Crown Heights, a rapidly gentrifying Brooklyn neighborhood that has gone from crack vials to eleven-dollar organic juice in the supermarket, I see how policing is affected by gentrification. . . . An important part of the neighborhood-to-prison-to-neighborhood pipeline is the paradox that violence and crime are seen as less problematic when the neighborhood is less wealthy. And of course, much of the crack cocaine sold in the old Crown Heights was sold to wealthier and whiter people who came to get their supply, and then left to smoke at home.

COMMENT 2. Shana Agid:

. . . Whose violence are we seeing here? In my own design work with an organization working in a midsize West Coast U.S. city on issues of policing, I've been wondering what happens to designers' practices when we allow ourselves to question the construction of some basic ideas that bring order and structure to our capacity to identify "problems" and "stakeholders." The group with which I work does not take "crime" for granted as a static category, but rather as one that is constructed to produce particular—and limited—ideas of both "violence" and "safety." If we, as designers, are willing to read across the grain, to not take for granted, for example, the idea that police are the primary experts on "crime" or that "violence" can be traced through arrest rates, then it has the capacity to greatly shift our practice, acknowledging that design (and designers) are one more contingent and moving part in complex design processes. This mapping project by the Spatial Information Design Lab and the Justice Mapping Center helps to reveal not only patterns of confinement and removal, but assumptions about what is worth seeing and how we learn to interpret what we see in relationship to hotly contested issues regarding policing, imprisonment, racism, and space. These questions are, and must be made, central to any designing around issues of imprisonment, violence, or "crime."

COMMENT 3. Cameron Tonkinwise:

"Eye-opening." And then? . . . The assumption is that the (designed) graphic does more than (undesigned) prose about the same issue. (Is the catchy title part of the design or the discourse? What about the concept that drove the research that the graphic merely illustrates?) If the graphic gains something in speed and force, it seems to lose other things with respect to complexity and context. The proposals to layer graphics onto each other would be difficult to design without re-prosifying the graphic. So there is a violence to the graphic in its reductivism and formalism.

And it is of course very beautiful in the modernist, clean-lines, silhouette-with-political-red, sophisticated-i.e.-expensive-data-tech way that my class and cultural upbringing have made me value. Is there even more violence to the graphic-as-violent-to-context detail (see above) when it conceals that violence beneath beauty? Or does it become even more beautiful precisely because it manages to make state- and capital-based violence beautiful? . . .

COMMENT 4. Susan Yelavich:

What is the value of this kind of navel gazing on design and violence? Of the value of commentary (through things and words) in an admittedly elite context, in the context of nowhere and everywhere—the web? What is the value of ideas without action? Hannah Arendt would, I think, have argued that political action flows from places that enable public speech. We are in one of those places here. What matters is the quality of speech it engenders. The objects seem less consequential than the comments they provoke or do not.

To return the legitimate and provocative critique offered by Cameron—that cultural institutions neuter violence by their distance from it—I would say that this is the paradox of design writ large. We can only hope that conversations, no matter how small, no matter whether conducted through words or things, will lead us to more thoughtful action.