

URBAN DESIGN

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Summary

This topic-level article on urban design begins with a critique of contemporary urban design, as follows: the field of urban design is vague because it is conceived as an ambiguous amalgam of several disciplines, including architecture, landscape architecture, urban planning and civil engineering; it is superficial because it is obsessed with impressions and aesthetics of physical form; and it is practiced as an extension of architecture, which often implies an exaggerated emphasis on the end product. The article then proposes a meaningful approach (i.e. truly consequential to improved quality of life) to urban design, which consists of: being teleological (i.e. driven by purposes rather than defined by conventional disciplines); being catalytic (i.e. generating or contributing to long-term socio-economic development processes); and being relevant (i.e. grounded in first causes and pertinent human values). The argument is supported with a number of case studies of exemplary urban designers and urban design projects from around the world. Finally, the article concludes with an outline of future directions in urban design, including criteria for successful urban design projects (e.g. aesthetics, function, impact) and a pedagogical approach (e.g. interdisciplinary, in-depth, problem-driven) to teach future designers.

1. Introduction

We are currently witnessing an urban revival. This is demonstrated by renewed interest in revitalizing inner cities; an expanding market for urban housing; the prominence of cities in popular magazines such as *Time* and *Newsweek*, and in popular television programs such as “Friends” and “Seinfeld”; a resurgence of urban design curricula at leading educational institutions such as the London School of Economics and the University of California at Berkeley; and an influx of international urban design

journals including the *Journal of Urban Design*, *Urban Design International* and *Urban Design Quarterly*. Seminal books, including *The Next American Metropolis*, *Great Streets*, and *Post-Modern Urbanism*, have attracted much attention in the past decade. Several large-scale urban projects are being built, including stadiums and casinos in the city of Detroit; the new Getty Center in Los Angeles; neo-traditional residential developments all over the United States; the Docklands in London (Figure 1); the new airport in Hong Kong; and massive urban redevelopment in Berlin and Beirut, to name only a few.



Figure 1: Urban revival: Canary Wharf in Docklands, London, United Kingdom, under construction

The conventional approach to defining the field of urban design is morphological; that is, according to the way it is structured and organized. Thus, urban design is often regarded as an ambiguous combination of architecture, urban planning, landscape architecture, and civil engineering. This definition puts urban designers at odds--over power and resources--with architects, planners, landscape architects and civil engineers, and thereby dilutes the powerful role urban design can potentially play in the unfolding of cities. Furthermore, much of the recent interest in urban design repeats the familiar deficiencies of the past, such as: a focus on the superficial aesthetics and the picturesque aspects of cities; an over-emphasis on the architect as urban designer and an obsession with design; an understanding of urban design primarily as a finished product; and a pedagogical process that is comfortably rooted in architecture and design (e.g. matters of visual composition).

One major problem with current urban design thought and practice is the sense that it is architecture, only at a larger scale and within an urban context. In this school of thought, there is far too much emphasis on the 'design', and not enough of an understanding of the 'urban'. Attempting to design a city as one designs a building is clearly misleading and dangerous, because unlike individual buildings which tend to be objects, cities are highly complex, large scale, active entities, and contain a bewildering multiplicity of communities. For example, an urban designer confronts issues that are quite different from those of an architect working for a single client. The urban designer engages in a physical environment driven by the dynamics of private commerce and public affairs; a world in which land costs, power relations, and interest-group conflicts bring about urban form.

Few contemporary urban designers demonstrate a fundamental understanding of the complex ways in which cities function. Especially glaring is the naiveté of contemporary urban designers vis-à-vis power structures and decision-making processes, dominated as they are by politicians, bureaucrats, corporations, developers, and interest groups. Thus, understanding a city or a part of a city, and designing it are two different endeavours. One needs to understand what cities are made of, how they come about and function, what they mean to people, and so forth, in order to actually design high-quality cities and their parts.

2. Meaningful Urban Design

This article proposes a meaningful approach to urban design; that is, an approach that is truly consequential in improving the essential qualities of life. The approach consists of being teleological, that is, driven by purpose rather than defined by disciplines; being catalytic, that is, generating or contributing to long-term development processes; and being relevant, that is, grounded in first causes and pertinent human values. In this view, then, urban design is driven by the purpose of addressing fundamental urban challenges, circumscribed by urban scale and complexity, and rests upon an interdisciplinary set of skills, methodologies, and bodies of knowledge.

3. Teleological

Urban design is an ongoing process with built form products such as open spaces, building complexes, and districts along the way. Primarily, however, it is a stimulus to other goals which are more critical to society and to the substantive challenges facing contemporary cities. These goals include community empowerment and social integration, inner city revitalization, cross-cultural learning and collaboration, effective land use, and a wider range of urban form choices for citizens.

Specifically, a teleological urban design would address three critical aspects of the urban experience, which are the relationships between the city and the economy, the city and society, and the city and power. The relationship between the city and the economy considers the economic functioning of the city, including the city as a point in the production landscape as well as a site of investment, the changing international division of labor, and the consequent effects on the specific urban economies. The relationship between the city and society focuses on the city as an arena of social

interaction, the distribution of social groups, residential segregation, the construction of gender and ethnic identities, and patterns of class formation. The relationship between the city and power is the representation of urban structure and political power, and considers the city to be a system of communication, a recorder of the distribution of power, and an arena for the social struggles over the meaning and substance of the urban experience.

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Biographical Sketch

Aseem Inam has practiced as an architect, urban designer, and planner in India, France, Canada, and the United States. He continues to participate in projects to help design better cities and neighborhoods, along with his students and in partnership with local communities. These projects have received national awards for their innovative character and contribution to community improvement. He teaches urban design seminars and studios, as well as courses in housing and international planning at the Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning, The University of Michigan, USA. He is currently working on two book projects. One is a comparative analysis of urban planning institutions in Mexico and United States, based on studies of successful and unsuccessful planning programs in the two countries. The other is an analysis of current urban design practice and teaching, and the formulation of a more meaningful approach to urban design, which is more purposeful, influential, and relevant to the critical problems facing cities in different parts of the world. He was awarded an Honorable Mention by the Chicago Institute for Architecture and Urbanism for the best writing on the future of the city, and was elected a Fellow of the Institute of Urban Design, New York, USA.