

WRITING URBANISM

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EDITED BY DOUGLAS KELBAUGH AND KIT KRANKEL McCULLOUGH



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A design reader

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MEANINGFUL URBAN DESIGN
Teleological/catalytic/relevant
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MEANINGFUL URBAN DESIGN

The conventional approach to defining the field of urban design is morphological; that is, according to the way it is structured and organized. 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 resource with architects, planners, landscape architects, and civil engineers, and thereby dilutes the leading role urban design can play in the blossoming 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 picturesque aspects of cities; an over-emphasis on the architect as urban designer and a singular 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 that tend to be objects, cities are highly complex, large scale, active entities, and contain a bewildering multiplicity of communities. 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, which are dominated by politicians, bureaucrats, corporations, developers, and interest groups.

I propose a meaningful approach to urban design, one that is truly consequential in improving the essential qualities of city 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 my 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.

TELEOLOGICAL

Urban design is an ongoing process with built forms such as open spaces, building complexes, and districts produced along the way. Primarily, it is a stimulus to other goals that 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.

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.

Such an approach would address the question: Why should the field of urban design even exist when there are far more powerful actors shaping cities? Because urban design is the only field that is geared specifically to shape the three-dimensional urban environment at multiple scales, and to constantly assert an effective symbiosis between urban form and society and its political-economic structures.

CATALYTIC

Urban design projects and processes would generate or contribute significantly to three types of socio-economic development processes while enhancing the built environment of cities: community development; economic development; and international development.

Urban design as a catalyst for community development consists of intelligent community participation in projects, facilitated by: dialogue between community representatives and urban designers; community leadership which is representative of broader community views; institutional partnerships, for example between private and nonprofit sectors; decision-making systems such as simulations and games; and the soft-programming of urban design, like the incorporation of public art into projects, and the integration of designed activities, events, programs, and services integrated into built form.

For the urban designer, design communication is inherent in the act of design, both as internal communication in the thinking process, and as an external communication with the client, user, or broader community. The people within a given context, such as homeowners in a residential neighborhood or business owners in a commercial downtown, are the agents of change, aided by a communication process that speaks to the formal aspects of their environment. The better this communication process of design is, the higher the level of public awareness and sense of ownership, and the better the internal decisions of change. There are conventional public involvement formats such as public hearings, city council meetings, and planning commission presentations, as well as informal meetings, workshops, and brainstorming sessions. The charrette is one of the more powerful and effective mechanisms for active and intelligent community participation.

1 Urban Design Group, "Involving local communities in urban design."

The Urban Design Group in the UK¹ provides a series of clear, concise, and extremely useful community participation forums, including innovative mechanisms such as street stalls and interactive displays. The popularity of the computer program SimCity, a city building simulator, attests to the possibility of designing urban simulation models with broad public appeal. These examples point to creative, engaging, and beneficial forms of not only community participation, but more significantly, community development, because they increase community awareness, generate community strategies, and suggest modes of community intervention in the future of their own environments.

An example of soft-programming as a long-term process of community development is illustrated by the Hismen Hin-nu Terrace housing project in Oakland, California.² With a grant from the City of Oakland, the architect Michael Pyatok studied development scenarios for housing and neighborhood services on several sites in the city and organized a series of workshops using participatory modeling kits to help over 30 neighborhood participants to design plans for the site and to understand the implications of density. The project not only houses families and elderly citizens with low incomes, but also helps mend a deteriorating neighborhood by restoring its main boulevard with housing over shops. Family housing with a day care center around quiet courtyards is built behind a ground-floor market, niches for street vendors, and a job-training center, all of which contribute to community development in the neighborhood. A multi-ethnic mix of tenants is depicted in exterior murals, frieze panels, decorative tiles, and steel entry gates in the form of a burst of sunshine. The art is intended to prove that America's cultural diversity is a source of energy for creating community, rather than a source of conflict.

2 Jones, Pettus and Pyatok, Good Neighbors: Affordable Family Housing.

Urban design as a catalyst for economic development involves designing projects that generate employment on a long-term basis, that attract investment into deprived areas, and that increase business and tax revenues.

Handwritten notes:
 - have discussed aspects of people's life
 - We all need to understand structure

Horton Plaza, a highly successful shopping center in San Diego, generated jobs for local residents when city officials utilized their position as stakeholders in the project to fill half of the nearly 1,000 new jobs, with 70 percent minority workers and 60 percent from high-unemployment, low-income neighborhoods.

Urban design as a catalyst for international development takes the guise of sensitivity to indigenous and cosmopolitan contexts, the generation of cross-cultural learning, and urban mediations of economic globalization.

Cross-cultural learning arises out of understanding and applying in a sympathetic and appropriate manner, urban design methodologies, processes, and forms from different cultural contexts.³ For example, housing authorities in the United States could learn from Henri Ciriani's social housing projects in France, which serve as a demonstration of how large-scale low-income housing projects built by the government can constitute positive contributions to the urban environment instead of being eyesores. La Courdangle, a large social housing project outside Paris in Saint Denis,⁴ is a seven-story building with striped cladding and geometric frieze that forms a corner in an otherwise loosely structured urban space. By creating a visually strong plan of geometrical precision, the project inspires a still-life composition device in urban design. Transformed into a picture plane, the various free-standing buildings as well as high-rise buildings that surround the project integrate into a more harmonious urban setting. The courtyard side of the building is a pure, right-angled figure containing a perfectly defined square space. The layering of the facades facilitates the articulation of the decreasing volumes, contains the apartments' balconies and terraces, and mediates between the architecture of the building and the urbanity of the neighborhood. In this manner, La Courdangle constitutes a low-income housing project that is rich in architectural spaces and detail, while helping define and enhance the urban space around it.

The ongoing phenomenon of globalization suggests some strategies for urban designers. Urban designers must be able to understand and react to influences impinging on their communities, regardless of where those influences originate (e.g. World Bank funded housing projects in developing countries) and which actors are responsible (e.g. American architectural firms designing office complexes in London). Furthermore, urban designers must develop associations and networks that extend beyond their spatial reach through collaborative endeavors and thereby provide another mechanism for responding to the multitude of actors who shape their communities. For example, the Indian architect B.V. Doshi utilized an institution, the Vastu-Shilpa Foundation for Studies and Research, to develop an internationally funded (i.e. World Bank), local (i.e. Indore, India) housing project in India, Aranya Nagar.⁵ The project has been largely a success due to the Vastu-Shilpa Foundation, which carried out considerable research, including surveys to understand the physical and economic factors that

3 Inam, "Institutions, routines, and crises: post-earthquake housing recovery in Mexico City and Los Angeles."

4 Ciriani, Henri Ciriani, pp. 66-73.

5 Serageldin, *The Architecture of Empowerment: People, Shelter and Livable Cities*.

determine the size, type, and density of the housing plots that were specific to the local context. The project translated international expectations into local needs through grassroots research.

RELEVANT

Urban design that is relevant is pertinent to matters at hand, and is based on fundamental human and natural conditions. I highlight three such relevant approaches to urban design: (1) a history of urban form that analyzes the determinant processes and human meanings of form, (2) a theory of urban form that is normative and based on human values, and (3) a design methodology of urban form that is empirically based and derived from patterns of human behavior.

Urban form is related directly to urban process over time; that is, the conjunction of people, forces, and institutions that brings about urban form. A way to examine this historical process is to ask probing research questions: Who actually designs cities? What procedures do they go through? Which are the empowering institutions and laws? Urban process also refers to physical change through time. The tendency all too often is to see urban form as a finite thing and a complicated object, but thousands of witting and unwitting acts every day alter a city's lines in ways that are perceptible only over a certain stretch of time. City walls are pulled down and filled in; once rational grids are slowly obscured; a slashing diagonal boulevard is run through close-grained residential neighborhoods; railroad tracks usurp cemeteries and waterfronts; and wars, fires, and highways annihilate city cores.⁶

As an example, let us consider the grid in history. The point is made regularly that grids, especially in the United States, besides offering simplicity in land surveying, recording, and subsequent ownership transfer, also favored a fundamental democracy in property market participation. This did not mean that individual wealth could not appropriate considerable property, but rather that the basic initial geometry of land parcels bespoke a simple egalitarianism that invited easy entry into the urban land market. The reality, however, is much less admirable. Ordinary citizens gained easy access to urban land only at a preliminary phase, when cheap rural land was being urbanized through rapid laying out. To the extent that the grid sped this process and streamlined absentee purchases, it may be considered an equalizing social device. Once the land had been identified with the city, however, this advantage of the initial geometry of land parcels evaporated, and even unbuilt lots slipped out of common reach. What matters most in the long run is not the mystique of the grid geometry, but the luck of first ownership.⁷

For the conventional urban designer, a grid is simply a grid.⁸ At best it is a visual theme upon which to play variations: he or she might be concerned with issues like using a true checkerboard design versus syncopated block

6 Kostof, *The City Shaped: Urban Patterns and Meanings Through History*, p. 13.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 100.

8 *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

rhythms, with cross-axial or other types of emphasis, with the placement of open spaces within the discipline of the grid, with the width and hierarchy of streets. For the meaningful urban designer, on the other hand, how, and with what intentions, the Romans in Britain, the builders of medieval Wales and Gascony, the Spanish in Mexico, or the Illinois Central Railroad Company in the American Midwest employed the same device of settlement is the principal substance of a review of orthogonal design. In fact, the grid has accommodated a startling variety of social structures, including territorial aristocracy in Greek Sicily, the agrarian republicanism of Thomas Jefferson, the cosmic vision of Joseph Smith in Mormon settlements like Salt Lake City, and capitalist speculation.

There have been few serious attempts at a comprehensive and normative theory of urban form. The book *Good City Form* is an impressive and daring attempt by Kevin Lynch⁹ at a systematic effort to state general relationships between the form of a place and its value to society. Lynch generalizes performance dimensions, which are certain identifiable characteristics of cities due primarily to their spatial qualities and are measurable scales along which different groups achieve different positions. These performance dimensions are based on the following thinking:

⁹ Lynch, *Good City Form*.

*The good city is one in which the continuity of [a] complex ecology is maintained while progressive change is permitted. The fundamental good is the continuous development of the individual or the small group and their culture: a process of becoming more complex, more richly connected, more competent, acquiring and realizing new powers—intellectual, emotional, social and physical . . . So that settlement is good which enhances the continuity of a culture and the survival of its people, increases a sense of connection in time and space, and permits or spurs individual growth: development, within continuity, via openness and connection . . . [a settlement that is] accessible, decentralized, diverse, adaptable, and tolerant to experiment.*¹⁰

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 116–117.

In Lynch's theory of good city form, there are seven basic dimensions. First is vitality, which is the degree to which an urban form supports the vital functions, biological requirements, and capabilities, and protects the survival of human beings, for example, via adequate throughput of water, air, food, and energy. Second is sense, which is the degree to which an urban form is clearly perceived and mentally differentiated as well as structured in time and space, and the degree to which that mental structure connects with the residents' values and concepts, for example, via a distinct identity and unconstrained legibility. Third is fit, which is the degree to which urban form matches the pattern and quantity of actions that people usually engage in, for example, via compatibility between function and form. Fourth is access, which is the ability to reach other people, activities, resources, and

places, including the quantity and diversity of the elements that can be reached, for example, via ease of communication and movement. Fifth is control, which is the degree to which the creation, access, use, maintenance, and modification to urban spaces and activities is managed by those who use, work or live in them, for example, via localized power. Sixth is efficiency, which is the cost of creating and maintaining an urban form, for example, via less energy-demanding processes. Seventh is justice, which is the way in which urban form costs and benefits are distributed among people, according to a principles such as intrinsic worth or equity, for example, via equal protection from environmental hazards such as traffic and pollution.

A problem-solving approach to urban design would explicitly render its design methodology, and describe how a meaningful urban designer might draw directly from empirical evidence and systematic research. The book *A Pattern Language* by Christopher Alexander *et al.* is most useful as a series of thoroughly analyzed and empirically based guidelines to solving common problems of urban form. Each suggested solution is described in a way that provides the key relationships, for example, between human behavior and spatial setting, needed to solve the problem, but in a general enough manner to allow for adaptation to particular lifestyles, aesthetic tastes, and local conditions. Each pattern describes a problem that occurs repeatedly in the built environment. The authors outline an urban design methodology that is based on archetypal problems (e.g. neighborhood size), analyses of built examples, descriptions of historical precedents, and the explicit unpacking of design solutions to render them clear, relevant, and thoughtful. The basis for the design patterns was extensive and thorough empirical research carried on over an eight-year period. There continues to be voluminous research on environment and behavior (e.g. Moore and Marans¹¹) that is highly relevant and useful for urban designers.

11 Moore and Marans, *Advances in Environment, Behaviour, and Design*.

DESIGNING THE FUTURE OF URBAN DESIGN

Urban designers are beginning to question what in fact is "urban" in the contemporary environment. A city is and will continue to be a relatively large, dense, and permanent settlement (or network of settlements) of socially heterogeneous individuals, and a point (or points) of maximum concentration for the power and culture of a community. A city is, and will continue to be, a catalyst: its power of attraction providing a concentration and diversity of peoples and purposes; its form celebrating the rich complexity of the human condition; its essence the true nature of human potential.¹²

12 Inam, "City, catalyst of hope."

In this vein, urban designers should focus more on the "urban" of urban design, and become less infatuated with the "design" of urban design. Urban design must begin with cities: how they work, how they change, and what impacts they have in creating enabling versus destructive impacts.

For example, urban design has to be seen as both, within the framework of investment and development policies, and as a shaper of those policies. Examples include David Crane's "capital web of investment decisions",¹³ and Richard Lai's "invisible web of laws"¹⁴ that guide people's behavior. An illustration of these "webs" is the dependence on private investments and initiatives for downtown rebuilding in American cities that has changed urban politics and the nature of the public realm. Private investment is generally seen as performing functions in the public interest. The public sector has become a facilitator; it responds to, reacts to, and regulates private initiatives. There is give-and-take in these public-private transactions as developers demand enhanced development rights, zoning variances, land write-down, financial guarantees, or improvements in order to initiate investment in American downtowns, while planners require in return certain urban amenities, usually public open space, street improvements, public art, housing, or even day care centers.¹⁵ The form of the contemporary urban downtown is a product of negotiation, bargaining, and deal-making between city governments and private developers, and not simply the product of an urban designer's imagination.

In this essay, there are three levels of success for an urban design project. These include first, the purely aesthetically informed notion of urban design as a finished product: Does it look good? By the means of compressing its meanings into a concise formal expression, a poetic urban design project draws the mind to a level of perception concealed behind the conventional presentations of urban form. The second is the sense of the project as an object that functions in an affordable, convenient and comfortable manner for its users: Does it work well? By the means of a meticulous understanding of human behavior and human needs, a truly utilitarian urban design project creates an environment that satisfies its users. The third is to have the urban design project generate or substantially contribute to socio-economic development processes: Does it produce significant long-term impacts? In this framework, urban designers and urban design projects become catalysts for long-term human development processes such as community betterment, economic improvement, and cross-cultural understanding.

The critical question that guides this meaningful future of urban design is: So what? That is, what consequential purpose has been achieved by particular urban design theories, urban design methodologies, urban design practices, and urban design projects? In order to further develop this line of thought, we can look to the American school of philosophy known as pragmatism. Pragmatism may be best characterized as the attempt to assess the significance for human value of technology in the broadest sense; that is, technology as the totality of means employed to provide objects necessary for human sustenance.¹⁶ The primary question that pragmatism raises is the question of *meaning*. Under what conditions does a statement

13 David Crane, *Planning and Design in New York: A Study of Problems and Processes of its Physical Environment*.

14 Richard Lai, *Law in Urban Design and Planning: The Invisible Web*.

15 Loukaitou-Sideris and Banerjee, *Urban Design Downtown: Poetics and Politics of Form*.

16 Kaplan, *The New World of Philosophy*, p. 14.

have meaning, and what meaning attaches to it in the light of those conditions?

What these formulations amount to is this: What conceivable bearing does a proposition, such as meaningful urban design, have on the conduct of our lives? Meanings, above all, involve purposes: and a meaningful urban design should involve the most substantive purposes of generating long-term processes of human development and ensuring that outcomes of those processes are highly pertinent to fundamental human values. Such an approach to urban design requires profound cultural understanding, social sensitivity, political savvy, and an in-depth grasp of the nature of cities; but in order to be truly meaningful, it needs to be driven primarily by a moral imperative. We can no longer afford to conceive of critical urban challenges—such as poverty and homelessness—and the socio-economic development processes that address them as being separate from urban design practices and projects. To be effective urban designers, we must help design the processes that shape our cities and foster true human development.

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