A Critical Review on The Current Thought and Practice of Urban Design: New Roles in the Future

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Abstract

Though urban design is historically rooted in development of cities, urban design, as a contemporary discipline, is relatively new compared to associated disciplines of architecture, urban planning, and landscape architecture. Urban design's close connection with these allied disciplines has also been the reason for its ambiguous nature, and its muddled definition. Accordingly, it is claimed here that a reexamination of the definition, status, and role of urban design is essential for the future directions of urban design as a discipline and cities as sustainable environments. In line with this, this article provides a critical framework regarding the current understanding of the discipline of urban design which is based on form, policy and

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efficiency, and highlights the need for place oriented approaches performed in an interdisciplinary working framework. The paper first focuses on the meaning and significance of urban design, and discusses the problems with the manner in which urban design is conceived, practiced and researched. Second, it interrogates the contemporary framework of urban design where the notions of 'urban' and 'design' are being disconnected. Third, it examines the changing role of urban design from the traditional to the contemporary mainstream approaches. The conclusion suggests lessons in terms of understanding and framing its scale, content, professional formation, interdisciplinary nature and role in sustainable urban environments.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past three decades, the advent of a post-industrial economy, the rise of the environmental movement, and the critique of top-down government decision-making have called for new approaches, both conceptually and methodologically, to the design and construction of urban environments. In this context, there appears a need for a critical urban design framing the increasingly contested terrain of urban resources and environments that addresses the emerging global trends, complex urban patterns, and evolving challenges of urbanization (UN Habitat, 2009).

Though urban design is historically rooted in development of cities, urban design, as a contemporary discipline, is relatively new compared to associated disciplines of architecture, urban planning, and landscape architecture. Urban design's close connection with these allied disciplines has also been the reason for its ambiguous nature, and its muddled definition. Accordingly, it is claimed here that a reexamination of the definition, status, and role of urban design is essential for the future directions of urban design as a discipline and cities as sustainable environments.

This article, following this introduction, first provides an understanding of the meaning and paradox of urban design, and discusses the problems with the manner in which urban design is conceived, practiced and researched. Second, it presents a critical framework where the notions of urban and design are being disconnected. Third, the changing role of urban design from the traditional to the contemporary mainstream approaches, and towards sustainable urbanism is explored. The conclusion highlights the dimensions of responsive urban design in order for urban design practices to have impact on ill-planned development in many world cities in a fast changing context.

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THE CURRENT UNDERSTANDING AND POSITION OF URBAN DESIGN

As defined in *By Design,* a guidance manual commissioned by the UK Government for local authority planners incorporating the conventional approach to good urban design (ODPM - UK, 2003), "urban design is the art of making places for people... it concerns the connections between people and places, movement and urban form, nature and the built fabric, and the processes for ensuring successful villages, towns and cities".

On the contrary to its position in the 1980s, the value of urban design has been widely acknowledged over the last three decades. In the West, it is now well integrated in the planning system. Urban designers increasingly occupy a central role in the development and redevelopment of cities. Design professionals with good urban design knowledge and skills are much sought after by private consulting firms, development organizations and local and state governments – where they are required to prepare and evaluate urban design policies, strategies, frameworks, guidelines, concepts, master plans and programs, as well as be involved in the more detailed design and management of urban spaces. Urban design knowledge and skills also assist in designing for specific sites by providing a better appreciation of urban structure and context.

However, only fairly recently has urban design been identified as a specific discipline. It encompasses practices which have always had a central place in urban planning and urban development, though with new techniques and different points of emphasis related to contemporary issues. The need for such a discipline has arisen as a result of the fundamental cultural, political, social and economic changes. These have focused attention on environmental issues and the quality of life, on the nature of the city and on how urban form can best be adapted to our current and future needs (Lloyd-Jones 1998).

PROBLEMS WITH CURRENT THOUGHT AND PRACTICE OF URBAN DESIGN

At present, there are problems with the manner in which urban design is conceived, practiced and researched. Owing to the emphasis on morphological aspects (physical aspects of the urban environment), that is the result of the stress on the problematic effect of negative space, urban design is often regarded as an ambiguous combination of architecture, urban planning, and landscape architecture. In this context, the qualities of the physical environment are perceived as being detached from urban use and appropriation as they would be

discussed, for example, by Jacobs (1961) and Alexander (1976), who regards the city primarily as a place of human habitation. Concentrating on the abstract concept of the spatial experience rather than on actual day-to-day life has ignored the users and their functional, social and emotional needs. Thus, although the city is examined and designed on the implicit basis of human experience, this experience is never discussed or considered specifically enough to make a difference (Kallus 2001).

Is urban design' architecture at a larger scale'?: Another problem with current urban design thought and practice is the sense that it has become almost synonymous with 'architecture at a larger scale' made up of building facades or building complexes, or designing 'objects' rather than creating 'places'. In line with this approach, there is too much emphasis on the visual and contextual dimensions of the townscape, an over-emphasis on the architect as urban designer and an obsession with design of individual buildings, and not enough consideration of 'urban context' (e.g. how cities work) (Lloyd-Jones 1998, Inam 2002) and building and urban space relationship. Accordingly, the profession has become very 'product' oriented, and the resulted urban environment has failed in terms of livability and sense of place.

Even when architects want to take the city into consideration, what precisely they take into account are mainly the visual aspects; however, it is just as important for the design to fulfill the physical, social, emotional and spiritual needs of the people who use the environment. In this context, there are some architects like Ralph Erskine, Lucien Kroll, and Herman Hetzberger who are worth mentioning as they have contributed through their architecture and writing to designing with people in mind, through their idiosyncratic approaches to making healthier and happier places for people to live in.

Another useful distinction of urban design lies in the relationship between the designer and the designed object. All designers (architect, interior designer, industrial designer, etc.), except contemporary urban designers, have a direct relationship with the object that they design, as schematically depicted in Figure 1. These designers make the decisions that dictate and directly shape the object. However, as depicted in Figure 2, contemporary urban designers have only an indirect relationship with the designed object. They shape the designed object by influencing decisions made by other designers who then directly shape the object; they design the decision environment within which other designers (both professional designers and non-designers whose decisions shape the built environment) create the designed object. In this context, there arises a problem of lack of control on the designed product, an issue highlighted by

George (1997, 150) by using the term 'second-order activity'
when describing urban design.
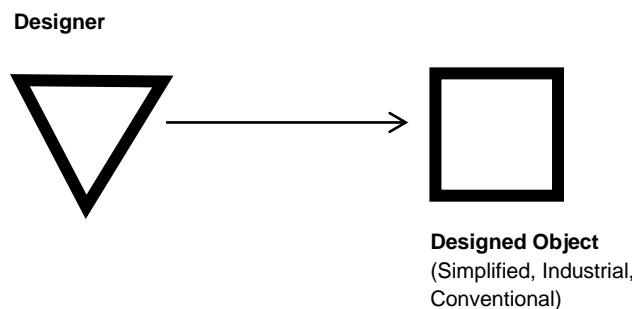
Figure 1. The relationship between the typical designer and the designed object.
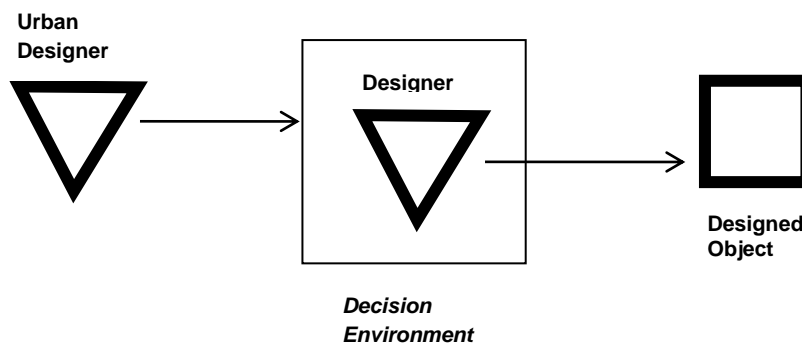

Figure 2. The indirect relationship between the urban designer and the designed object in contemporary cases (George, 1997).

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Expectations from urban designers: In terms of the
knowledge-base, like architects, urban designers must be
knowledgeable about forming and manipulating spaces, and
must be sensitive to the quality of spaces. This is the only area of
knowledge where the two fields completely overlap. The second
area of the architect's knowledge-base, knowledge of user
characteristics or the relationships between people and the built
environment, is also shared by the two fields. However, urban
designers need additional skills and knowledge of the urban
context; they must know about urban systems and processes of
change in urban areas. Further, there is a need for urban design
to be informed by concepts, methods, and lessons from
sociology, anthropology, cultural landscape studies,
environmental psychology, geography, climatology, the
management studies, and even art, in addition to obvious
disciplines such as architecture, urban planning, and landscape
architecture. As no single person can encompass all this

knowledge and bring it to reflect on decision making and design, urban design will and should remain a collaborative task.

The question of professional formation: One question that has often been a point of discussion is "who are urban designers?" In the prevalent paradigm of urban design pedagogy, urban designers are primarily trained as architects, planners or engineers, each having one's own design bias. Architects see design as formal orientation in space. Planners conceive design as regulatory framework and implementation of policies reflecting social and economic value. Engineers understand design as efficiency in production. These divergences imply a problem of communication and the necessity of language of urban design to have a role of bridging.

On that front, a higher level qualification in urban design following an undergraduate degree in architecture is crucial. In this way, as depicted in Figure3, the architect - urban designer can take the lead in a multi-disciplinary team and direct the urban design process in a decision environment informed by a variety of disciplines, such as politics, sociology, anthropology, cultural landscape studies, environmental psychology, geography, climatology, management studies, public art, and so forth.

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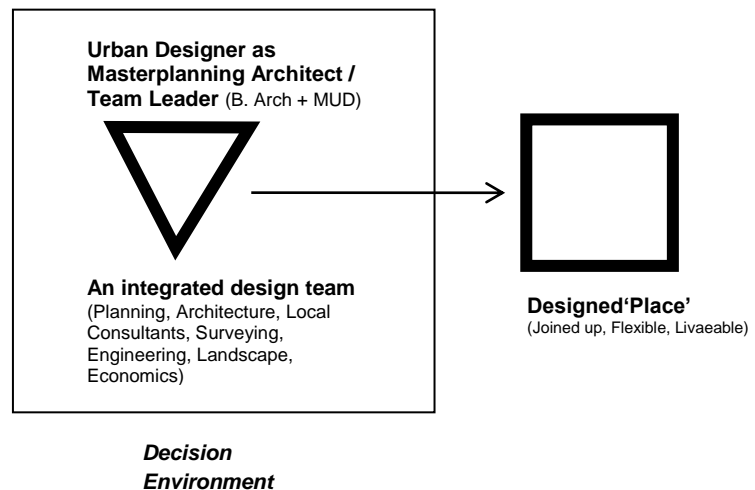
Figure 3. The proposed formation for the urban designer and his/her relationship with the designed object.

The institutional framework: As for the institutional framework, how urban design best fits into the professional world is an area of continuing debate. There are (as yet) no professional bodies to dictate what should be on the curriculum of an urban design degree program, nor what sorts of specific expertise and knowledge are needed to practice as an urban designer. This is not a coincidence; it is generally agreed that urban design is not a distinct profession in itself so much as a

way of thinking, or, to paraphrase Britain's Urban Design Group,
as common ground among a number of professions and/or the
wide range of people involved in urban change. To practice
urban design, however, an individual should be a registered
member of professional regulating bodies in architecture,
landscape architecture, and/or urban planning.

THE NEW ROLES FOR URBAN DESIGN

Understanding the role of urban design is essential for
providing positive orientations in its future directions.
Traditionally, based on the most common understanding that
urban design is the interface between urban planning and
architecture, it plays a mediator role between two major
disciplines involved in the urban realm, but at different levels
and scales.

**Objectives of the contemporary mainstream
approach to urban design:** The following objectives of the
contemporary mainstream approach to urban design based on
the contributions of a number of European and American
academics, theorists and practitioners from the 1950s onwards
make it clear what roles a responsive urban design activity may
play: (Lloyd-Jones 2006)

- *Character and identity*: to promote character in
  townscape and landscape by responding to and
  reinforcing locally distinctive patterns of development,
  landscape and culture.
- *Continuity and enclosure*: to promote the continuity of
  street frontages and the enclosure of space by
  development that clearly defines private and public
  areas.
- *Quality of the public realm*: to promote public spaces and
  routes that are public spaces and routes that are
  attractive, safe, uncluttered and work effectively for all in
  society, including disabled and elderly people.
- *Ease of movement*: to promote accessibility and local
  permeability by making places that connect with each
  other and are easy to move through, putting people
  before motor car and integrating land uses and transport.
- *Legibility*: to promote legibility through development that
  provides recognizable routes, intersections and
  landmarks to help people find their way around.
- *Adaptability*: to promote adaptability through
  development that can respond to changing social,
  technological and economic conditions.
- *Diversity*: to promote diversity and choice through a mix
  of compatible developments and uses that work together
  to create viable places that respond to local needs.

New roles in the context of sustainable urbanism: In a widening context, urban designers are now being given new roles being called upon to address development issues in all types of context, green field, suburban and inner-city and brown field regeneration, as well as the city centers. Ecologically sustainable, higher-density, mixed-use, permeable neighborhoods and centers with well-structured, pedestrian and public-transport orientated features have been developed. Conventional urban design contributes greatly to the policies required to achieve the sustainable development of rich world cities, most of which are not growing very much in population but continue to eat up land and natural resources, and to damage social life.

CONCLUSIONS

Urban design lies at the intersection of the interests of the three main professions concerned with the layout of the environment – architecture, landscape architecture and urban planning. However, urban design while overlapping these fields has developed its own area of expertise.

Since current urban design thought and practice have recently been dominated by the visual and contextual understanding of the townscape, and in many cases has become almost synonymous with 'architecture at a larger scale', there is a need for a paradigmatic shift in the focus of urban design from the current model of urban design framework, where the social control, economic efficiency, and spatial order are compartmentalized. The focus on understanding urban, on the contrary, requires an adaptive inclusive model that addresses relational issues among multiple dimensions of urban design and the urban environment. In brief, a dynamic multi-dimensional viewpoint is required which combines political, environmental, economic and cultural aspects of urban design and development in the changing of the city.

As these deliberations suggest, we should be aware of the fact that urban design is different from architecture! It requires additional skills and knowledge of the urban context. Further, there is a need for urban design to be informed by concepts, methods, and lessons from sociology, anthropology, cultural landscape studies, environmental psychology, geography, climatology, the management studies, and even art, in addition to obvious disciplines such as architecture, urban planning, and landscape architecture. As no single person can encompass all this knowledge and bring it to reflect on decision making and design, urban design will and should remain a collaborative task.

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The problem of communication between architects, who see design as formal orientation in space, and planners, who have problems with the language of design, compels the necessity of language of urban design to have a role of bridging. On that front, a higher level qualification in urban design following an undergraduate degree in architecture is crucial. Such a formation would also enable the architect to develop interdisciplinary critical skills to build better places, and acquire the role of the 'master planning architect' within an integrated design team.

If urban design is to have any impact at all on ill-planned sprawling development in many world cities in a fast changing context, it needs to look to a wider landscape understanding of character and identity, to relationships between built form that are not exclusively focused on continuity and enclosure; to consider more accessible and communicative city and legibility beyond the street environment, roads and public transport interchanges; to give much greater concern to the legibility of the urban and suburban landscape; and to focus on the requirements of sustainable urbanism for safeguarding the natural, built and cultural values in our cities.

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CV (Resume)

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