THE CURRENT STATUS, ROLE AND FUTURE OF URBAN DESIGN

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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 embedded in the development of cities, urban design, as a contemporary theoretical and professional discipline, is relatively new compared to the associated disciplines of architecture, urban planning, and civil engineering. 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 re-examination of the definition, status, and role of urban design is essential for the future directions of urban design and that of cities.

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 organisations 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.

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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).

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, landscape architecture and civil engineering. 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 regard 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).

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 liveability 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, 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.

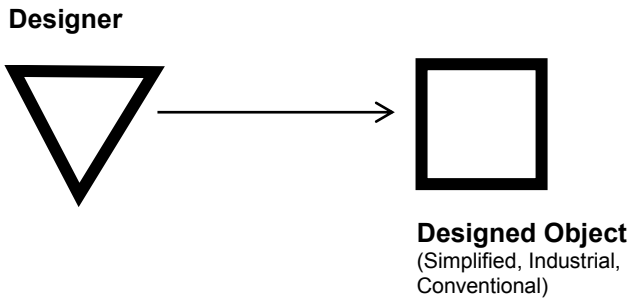

Figure 1. The relationship between the typical designer and the designed object.

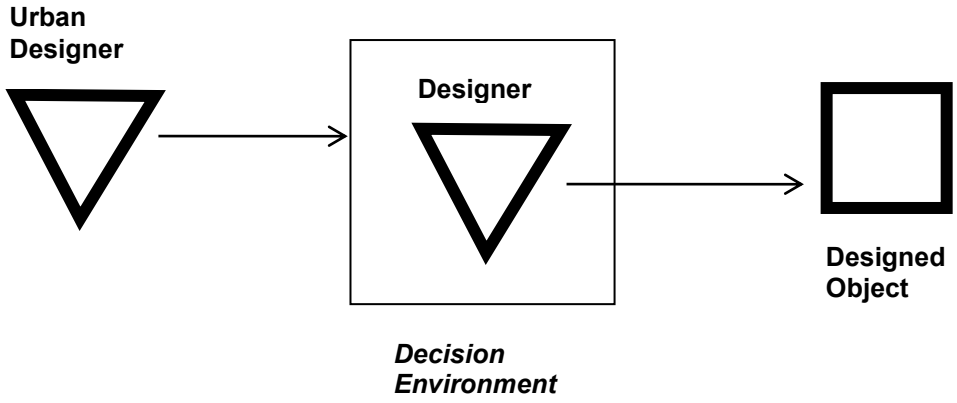

Figure 2. The indirect relationship between the urban designer and the designed object in contemporary cases (George, 1997).

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, landscape architecture, and civil engineering. 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.

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 Figure 3, 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.

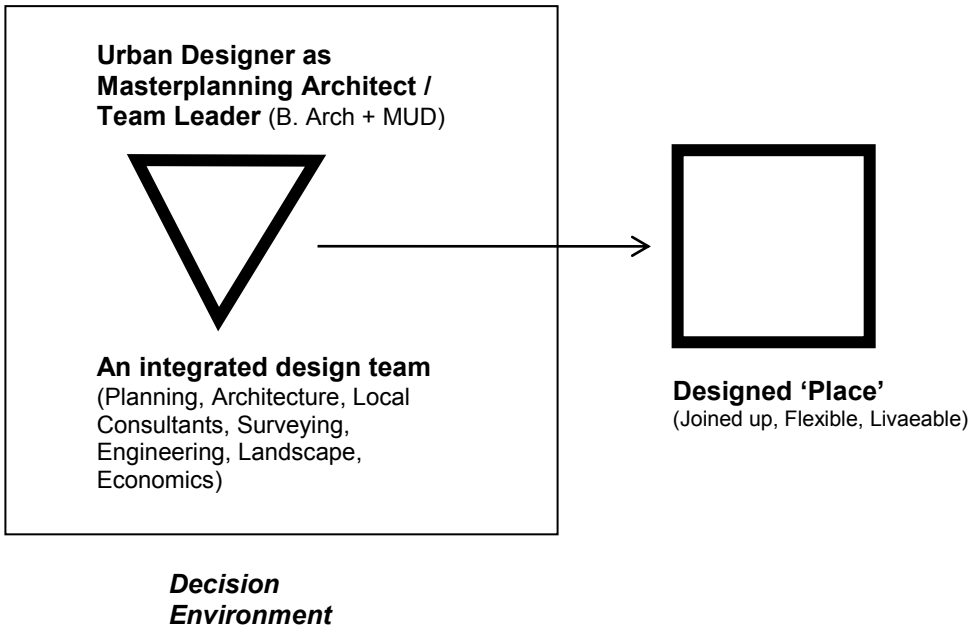

Figure 3. The proposed formation for the urban designer and his/her relationship with the designed object.

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.

Roles of 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.

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 recognisable 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.

In a widening context, urban designers are now being given new roles being called upon to address development issues in all types of context, greenfield, suburban and inner-city and brownfield regeneration, as well as the city centres. 'Anti-sprawl'or 'compact' city models of sustainable, higher-density, mixed-use, permeable neighbourhoods and centres with well-structured, pedestrian and public-transport orientated features have been developed for most, if not all these contexts. 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. The established urban design principles have also proved quite robust in addressing other aspects of sustainable development in the cities of the developed world, including quality of life, social inclusion and social integration and identity issues.

Conclusion

Urban design lies at the intersect of the interests of the three main professions concerned with the layout of the environment – architecture, landscape architecture and urban planning, and civil engineering. 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, landscape architecture, and civil engineering. 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 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 'masterplanning 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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