

Territories of Urban Design

By Alex Krieger

February 2004

In 1956 an international conference took place at Harvard's Graduate School of Design determined to assemble evidence on behalf of a discipline called urban design. An impressive number of people then engaged in thinking about the future of cities participated in the conference. Among them were a not-yet famous Jane Jacobs, an already prominent Edmund Bacon; the Olympian figure of Lewis Mumford; several leaders of the soon-to-be-formed Team 10; prominent landscape architects such as Hideo Sasaki and Derek Eckbo, urban renewal-empowered mayors such as David Lawrence of Pittsburgh; and innovators such as Victor Gruen, the oft-cited creator of the shopping mall.

As a group the participants concurred that the widening mid-century intellectual split between the 'art of building' and the 'systemic nature of planning' was not helpful to city building, or rebuilding as the post WWII era still demanded. Hopes and ideas for a new discipline dedicated to city design were in the air, both in the States and in Europe, with CIAM focusing more attention to matters of urbanization since the early 1940's. The conference participants were determined to share and further such thinking, hopeful that a new discipline could stem this perceived split between design and planning. Indeed, within several years Harvard would commence one of the very first formal degree-granting curricula focused on urban design, and through that institution's prestige lend weight to the idea that educating an urban design professional was essential for a still rapidly urbanizing world.

The proceedings of the '56 conference reveal two working definitions for urban design, both articulated by Josep Lluís Sert, who organized and presided over the conference. Urban design, he stated at one point, "is that part of city planning which deals with the physical form of the city." Here is the idea of urban design as a sub-set of planning, a specialization that he described as "the most creative phase of city planning, in which imagination and artistic capacities play the important part." At the beginning of the conference he identified a yet more ambitious goal; "to find the common basis for the joint work of the Architect, the Landscape Architect and the City Planner....Urban Design [being] wider than the scope of these three professions". Here is the notion of a new overarching design discipline to be practiced by all those who were, in Sert's phrase, "urban-minded".

Half a century later these two conceptualizations are still much in play, and a precise definition for urban design not yet achieved. Whether urban design has become a distinct professional specialization, or a general outlook that can be embodied in the work of several of the design disciplines dedicated to city-making remains a point of rumination. However illusive a precise definition has been, few argue about the need for something called urban design.

In a world producing unprecedented kinds and sizes of settlement it is an increasingly sought after expertise, though not always well recognized. There are myriad expectations that society (rightly) has of those presuming to know how to design cities, and there is skepticism about how much such know-how exists. At the same time, it seems presumptuous to claim overview knowledge of something as immensely complex as urbanism. So it seems prudent to track several territories, spatial and conceptual, along which urban designers operate. Indeed, scanning the definitions of the word territory in a good dictionary eventually gets you past geography to "sphere of action." This I find to be a particularly useful way of thinking about urban design -- as *spheres of urbanistic action*. I will sketch out several such spheres of urbanistic action, for I do not believe that there is one general or overarching way to describe what constitutes the urban design enterprise.

Before proceeding it is important to acknowledge that while 'urban design' is a term first popularized during the twentieth century cities have, of course, been the subject of design theory and design action for centuries. It is the notion of urban design as an activity distinct from architecture,

planning, or even military or civil engineering, that is relatively new – as is the label of ‘urban designer.’

Though Pope Sixtus V's impact on the physicality of sixteenth century Rome was profound, contemporaries would not have thought him to be an urban designer. Spain's Philip II, who promulgated one of the most precise codes for laying out cities -- the Laws of the Indies -- was, well, king. Haussmann was Napoleon III's Prefect of the Seine, an administrator, closer in point of view and responsibilities to Robert Moses, an engineer and civil servant, than to Raymond Unwin or Daniel Burnham, both architects acting as city planners. Ebenezer Howard, who truly had a new theory for urbanism was an economist. Camillo Sitte was an art historian. Frederick Law Olmsted, who influenced American cities more than any nineteenth century contemporary, was a landscape architect and earlier still a social activist. Lewis Mumford was a philosopher and author. The foremost Renaissance urban theorists were architects and artists, as was LeCorbusier. During much of the history of city-making an architect's expertise was assumed to extend to matters of town layout, and popes, prefects and utopian economists quite naturally turned to their architect to carry-out their urban visions. Many of the 1956 conference participants were also architects, and an architectural point of view has tended to prevail in most efforts to describe what urban design is – prevail, but not encapsulate.

Below are ten spheres of urbanistic action which people calling themselves urban designers have assumed to be their professional domain, though obviously not all at once, nor even with unanimity about the list overall. The list begins with a foundational idea of urban design, at least as identified at the '56 Harvard conference; that urban design occupies a hypothetical intersection between planning and architecture, and thus fills any perceived gaps between them. Urban design, many continue to believe, is necessarily and unavoidably:

1. The Bridge Between Planning and Architecture

The most frequently offered response to what urban designers do is that they mediate between plans and projects. Their role is to somehow translate the objectives of planning regarding space, settlement patterns and even the allocation of resources, into (mostly) physical strategies to guide the work of architects, developers and other implementers. For example, many public planning agencies now incorporate an urban design staffer-or-two whose role is to establish criteria for development beyond basic zoning, and then help review, evaluate and approve the work of project proponents as they advance their projects through design and into construction. Such a design review process is an increasingly common component of a city's regulatory framework, allowing traditionally controversial issues such as aesthetics to become factors discussed during project review and approval. It is the urban designer's presumed insights about good or appropriate urban form that is seen as crucial in the translation of policy or program objectives into architectural concepts, or to recognize the urbanistic potential in an emerging architectural design and thus advocate for its realization.

A subtlety within this process is, however, often misunderstood. The translation of plans into designs is not meant to be a linear process – always emanating from planning to affect design – but interactive. The urban designer's own expertise in architectural thinking should inform the formulation of plans so that these are not fixed prior to consideration of physical implications. This design version of shuttle diplomacy, between plan formulators and translators is important to be sure, but cannot rely only on mediation or persuasion to be effective. Urban designers must visualize, and make others see, the desired affects of planning. This requires specific techniques by which goals and policies are converted into potent design guidelines. It leads to the idea of urban design as a special category of public policy, an improvement on traditional land use regulations that shy away from qualitative assessments of form. So shouldn't urban design then be considered:

2. A Form-Based Category of Public Policy

A book titled “Urban Design as Public Policy” published in the mid-1970’s by Jonathan Barnett argued this very point and became highly influential. If one could agree on specific attributes of good urbanism (at least in a particular setting, as Barnett’s book attempted to do with New York City) then one should be able to mandate or incentivize the incorporation of these through additional regulatory requirements. The radicalism embedded in this self-described pragmatic approach was to incorporate many more formal and aesthetic judgements -- indeed *much* more judgement, period -- into a standard zoning ordinance, and especially into the permitting and evaluative process. Restrictions on height or massing that in pioneering zoning codes (such as New York’s own landmark 1916 code) were ostensibly determined through measurable criteria such as access to sunlight, could now be introduced as commonly held good form-based values. The mandating of continuous block-length cornice heights, for example, gained the equivalency of a lot-coverage restriction, though the former could not as easily be considered a matter of “health, safety and public welfare” as the latter.

But why shouldn’t public policy, as it pertains to the settled environment, not aspire to quality and even beauty? More recently, a New York disciple of Barnett’s, Michael Kwartler, expressed this via the poetic notion of “regulating the good that you can’t think of,” or, one may infer, seek to achieve through regulation *what is not* normally provided by conventional real estate practices. Since American planning is often accused of being reactive to real estate interests, interests that do not always prioritize public benefit, here would be a way to push developer-initiated projects to higher qualitative standards. So, again, given the presumption that what constitutes good urban form (or desirable uses, or amenities such as ground level retail, or open space) can be agreed upon by a community, these should be legislated. And the natural champion for this is the urban designer. The appeal behind this interpretation of urban design is two-fold. It maintains lofty ideals by arguing on behalf of codifiable design qualities, while at the same time operates at the pragmatic level of the real estate industry, facilitating better development.

This may all be well and good, but such mediating and regulating is not sufficiently rewarding for those who believe that less creativity is involved in establishing guidelines for others to interpret than to design oneself. It seems too administrative and passive a role for urban design. Is not urban design about giving shape to urbanism? Isn’t it about:

3. The Architecture of the City

This conception of urban design is at once more ambitious yet more narrow than the idea of urban design as public policy. The roots of this view may be traced earlier in the 20th century to the American City Beautiful movement, and further into the 19th century to the European Beaux Arts tradition. Its proponents seek above all to regulate the shaping of those areas of the city which are public and, therefore, of common concern. It is a sphere mainly populated by architect-urbanists, but makes kindred spirits of diverse figures such as Colin Rowe, Camilo Sitte, and William H. Whyte.

Shaping public space is considered the first order of urbanism by the architect/urbanist. Thus the primary role of urban design is to develop methods for doing so. Done with authority and artistry (and proper programming/furnishing which was Whyte’s contribution) allows the rest of the city, all that is private, to distribute itself logically and properly in relationship to this public realm. During the ‘70’s and ‘80’s, particularly in Europe, a related theory of the “Urban Project” emerged. This entailed the programming, financing and design of a catalytic development, often a joint public/private venture, which would stimulate or revive an urban district. This notion of urban design is best embodied by a stable and stabilizing form, one that anchors its part of the city with unique characteristics that are expected to endure and influence future neighbors.

The idea of urban design as the architecture of the city is often conceptualized in terms of the ideality of Rome as portrayed in the Nolli Map, or in Piranesi’s more fantastical description of Imperial

Rome in his *Compo Marzio* engraving. Or, it is simply absorbed via our touristic encounters with the pre-industrial portions of the European city in which the emphasis on the public realm – at least in the places that we regularly visit – seems so clear. Not a particularly large conceptual leap from this formulation of urban design leads to the idea of:

4. Urban Design as Restorative Urbanism

The form of the pre-industrial western city – compact, dense, layered and slow changing – holds immense power over city dreaming among both urbanists and the public. The traditional city seems at once so clearly organized, humanely sized, manageable and beautiful. Such virtues seem absent in the modern metropolis. Why not mobilize to regain these? At present the New Urbanists are most closely associated with this sphere, but are part of a long tradition of those guarding or extolling the advantages of traditional urban typologies. As did the polemicists of the City Beautiful movement in America a century earlier, the New Urbanists advocate a return to what they consider time-honored principles of urbanism, now as often appealing to a disillusioned suburban culture as for those still facing the full onslaught of urban modernization.

Americans today seem particularly sympathetic for two reasons. They hunger for a ‘taste’ of urbanity, pre-assembled and sanitized perhaps – ‘lite urbanism’ in Rem Koolhaas’s wry phrase -- having for several generations disengaged from (and still unsure about) the real thing. And, assaulted by the new and the next they seek comfort in the familiar. Traditionally, homes and neighborhoods have offered respite from the drumbeat of change. Thus, it is understandable how an era of seemingly unending innovation in business, technology and life-style marketing engenders a sentimental recall of the places we used to live in. Though we may demand the conveniences of modern kitchens and attached garages many prefer to package these in shapes and facades reminiscent of earlier (assumed to be) slower and pleasanter paces of life.

The walkable city, the city of public streets and public squares, the low-rise high-density city, the city of defined neighborhoods gathered around valued institutions, the city of intricate layers of uses free of auto-induced congestion are characteristics that remain appealing. Americans are not alone in pining for such qualities. In today’s Berlin, to refer to one European example, the city planning administration’s highly conservative architectural design guidelines for the reunified center are but another manifestation of this instinct to slow the pace of change – at least as it pertains to the physical, if not the social or political, environment. Many urban designers believe that it is their discipline’s responsibility to retard undo change, resist unwarranted newness, or at least advocate for such old fashioned notions as ‘human scale’ and ‘place making’. Then shouldn’t we think of:

5. Urban Design as ‘Place-Making’

A corollary to restorative urbanism is the rise of the term ‘place-making.’ There are actually architecture and urban design firms in the States who advertise themselves as ‘place-makers.’ It is easy to express cynicism, so many ordinary developments advertise their placeless environments with catchy names ending in “place,” among the most common, if absurd, of these being ‘Center Place,’ a moniker promising two of things often missing in new subdivisions. There are times when a marketing slogan reveals the absence of something more readily than it delivers on its promise to achieve more of that very same thing.

Yet, creating exceptional places to serve human purpose has always been central to the design professions. We’ve just never called ourselves place-makers before, or have been so self-conscious about the task. Economists often remind society that it is the rare commodity that gains value over time. As more contemporary urban development acquires generic qualities, or is merely repetitive, the distinctive urban place, old or new, is harder to find. This alone will continue to fuel preservation movements across the urban world. But in a world that adds sixty million more people to urban

populations each year, preservation cannot be the answer to place-making. More urban designers should devote their attention to making new places as worthy as their time-honored predecessors. Again, it is the American New Urbanists who have articulated this goal most clearly, but with mixed results. Their rhetoric extols intimate scale, texture, the mixing of uses, connectivity, continuity, the privileging of what is shared, and other such characteristics of great urban places, but their designs tend to focus on familiar old forms and traditional aesthetic detailing.

The obvious merits of preserving venerable old urban places aside, or the wisdom of treading lightly in the midst of historic districts, doubts remain about how successfully we might organize and 'clothe' the complexities of modern life in familiar iconography. What if one places less faith in the dressing up of new development with emblems of urbanity, and devotes more effort to wiser distribution of resources or better land management? Your call to action becomes:

6. Urban Design as Smart Growth

While there has been a strong association of urban design with 'downtowns', demand for suburban growth management and reinvestment strategies for the older rings around city centers have gathered many advocates. Indeed, to protect urbanism, not to mention minimize environmental harm and needless land consumption, it is imperative, many argue, to control sprawl and to make environmental stewardship a more overt part of urban thinking. Expressed opportunistically, it is also where the action is. Since 90% of development takes place at the periphery of existing urbanization, the urban designer should be operating there, and if present advocate 'smarter' planning and urban design. Conversely, ignoring the metropolitan periphery as if it were unworthy of a true urbanist, or merely limiting one's efforts to urban "infill," may simply be a form of problem avoidance.

That the 21st century will be more conservation minded is little in doubt. That the world overall must be smarter about managing resources and land is also clear. Therefore, the traditional close allegiance of urban design to an architectural and development perspective must be broadened. Exposure to the natural sciences, to ecology, to energy management, to systems analysis, to the economics of land development, to land use law, to issues of public health have not been fundamental to an urbanist's training, but are becoming more so. Urban designers who are advocating a "smart growth" agenda today generally do so out of an ideological conviction that sprawl abatement or open space conservation are necessary. But as they enter this territory they quickly realize that acquiring additional skills and partners in planning are equally necessary.

To actually manage metropolitan growth requires dealing with systems that cut across jurisdictional boundaries, like land conservation, water management and transportation. Therefore, and increasingly for many, urban design must be about:

7. The Infrastructure of the City

The arrangement of streets and blocks, the distribution of open and public spaces, the alignment of transit and highway corridors, and the provision of municipal services certainly constitute essential components of urbanism. Indeed, to focus on just one category of urban infrastructure, few things are more important to cities, or virtually any form of contemporary settlement, than well-functioning transportation systems. Yet, the optimization of mobility pursued as an independent variable, separate from the complex and overlapping web of other urban systems, ultimately works against healthy communities. Engineering criteria, we have learned, while important are not sufficient city-producing tools.

Apart from the occasional efforts to 'architecturalize' infrastructure, as in the various megastructure proposals of the 1960's, (a source of fascination again today) neither planners nor designers have played a significant role in the realm of transportation or other urban infrastructure planning. It has become another sphere for someone called an urban designer to

engage, at both the pragmatic level of calibrating demands for mobility with other social needs, and in advancing new ways in which city form and transportation systems may be integrated.

In a way the 20th century love affair with the car – still considered the ideal personal mobility system – has diminished the range of conceptualizing about urban form and transportation. We were too mesmerized by the magic of Sant’Elia’s Italian Futurists renderings and those of LeCorbusier’s *Ville Radieuse*. An entire century later we are rediscovering that integrating urban form and mobility depends on more sophisticated umbilical cords than the open road. This is especially so since the engineering world is shifting emphasis from hardware to systems design, from adding lanes, for example, to traffic management technology. It is their acknowledgment that factors such as livability, sustainability, economic and cultural growth, in other words good urban design, are the real goals of infrastructure optimization.

Agreeing with such a sensibility, the leaders of the field of landscape architecture, a field that has generally pursued a more humanistic perspective on planning, have recently advanced another perspective on urbanistic action:

8. Urban Design as “Landscape Urbanism”

In the last few years a new rallying point called *Landscape Urbanism* has emerged. Its proponents seek to incorporate ecology, landscape architecture and infrastructure into the discourse of urbanism. The movement’s intellectual lineage may encompass Ian McHarg, Patrick Geddes and even Frederick Law Olmsted, though its polemical point of departure seems to be that landscape space, not architecture any longer, is the generative force in the modern metropolis.

To return to the ’56 conference for a moment, there was a good deal of rhetoric about how landscape architecture was to be an integral part of the urban design process. Quickly this aspect was subsumed under the architecture vs. planning dichotomy in which urban design would occupy the mediating middle. Momentarily there was no conceptual space left for landscape architecture. Ironically, more areas of settlement in North America have been designed by landscape architects than anyone else. However, there has persisted an accusation (sometimes accurate) that landscape architect’s directed urban design favors low densities, exhibits little formal sensibility, and contains too much open space; in other words it produces sub-urban environments.

Landscape urbanists challenge such a cliché, instead insisting that the conception of the solid, ‘man-made’ city of historic imagination perpetuates the oppositional – and no longer pertinent – view that nature and human artifice are opposites. Landscape urbanism projects purport to overcome this opposition, holding neither a narrow ecological agenda nor mainstream (read architectural) city-making techniques as primary. Valuable urban design, landscape urbanists insist, is to be found at the intersection of ecology, engineering, design and social policy.

In one regard the movement may be a reaction to the Nolli Map view of urbanism; that is, of a binary conception of cities as made up of buildings and the absence of buildings, where the white of the map – the voids – are the result of built form, the black of the map. Maybe this was a useful interpretation of the pre-industrial city – of the Italian piazza as space carved out of the solidity of built fabric. Outside the pre-industrial walled city were certainly landscapes and undesignated space, but within the city space resulted from built form. Any careful perusal of a pre-industrial era city map proves this assertion false, and surely the “white” of the Nolli plan comes in many hues and nuances of meaning. Besides, the landscape urbanists ask, isn’t the landscape the modern glue that holds the modern metropolis together?

The radicalism inherent in conceptualization landscape as generative for urbanism, where Nolli's white, today colored green, is the central component of urban design, brings us at last to the territory of:

9. Urban Design as Visionary Urbanism

I have saved, nearly for the end, this long-standing expectation of urban design; that its practitioners – or rather, in this instance, its *theorists* – provide insight and models about the way we ought to organize spatially in communities, not simply accept the ways we do. The prospect of hypothesizing about the future of urbanism surely attracts more students to urban design programs than any other. Being engaged in transforming urbanism is a sphere of action associated with the great figures of modern urban change, from (depending on one's heroes) Baron Haussmann, to Daniel Burnham, to Ebenezer Howard, to Raymond Unwin, to LeCorbusier, and maybe even Rem Koolhaas and Andres Duany today. But such deliverers of bold saber strokes (to borrow a phrase from Gideon) are rarer today than they were at the turn of the 20th century, or we heed their visions less often. A new generation of visionary designers may emerge out of China or other parts of the world rapidly urbanizing today, but have yet to do so.

In the relative absence of contemporary visionaries others have stepped forward to explore the nature of urban culture today. The urban sociologist/theorist -- from Louis Wirth, to Henri Lefebvre, to Richard Sennett, Edward Soja or David Harvey, is not normally considered an urban designer but in a sense has become so, having supplanted in our own time the great urban transformers of the past, not in deeds but in pondering urban culture.

The heroic form-giving tradition may be in decline. After all, the twentieth century witnessed immense urban harm caused by those who offered a singular or universal idea of what a city is, or what urbanization should produce. But our cultural observers remind us that pragmatism and technique cannot be a sufficient substitute, nor can design professionals be mere *absorbers* of public opinion waiting for consensus to build. One must think and offer ideas as well. Still, there is the perennial conundrum about how directly engaged urban design must be with the 'real world.' Maybe, after all, urban design is about community assistance:

10. Urban Design as Community Advocacy (or Doing no Harm)

Mostly since 1956, and in academia largely still, urban design evokes notions of large-scale thinking; either the consideration of substantial areas of settlement, or theorizing at a grand scale about the nature of urbanism. But among contemporary dwellers of urban neighborhoods – the ostensive beneficiaries of this broad thinking – the term urban design is increasingly coming to be associated with local, immediate concerns such as improving neighborhoods, calming traffic, minimizing negative impacts of new development, expanding housing choices while keeping housing affordable, maintaining open space, improving streetscapes, and creating more humane environments in general.

In this newer almost colloquial usage of the term, urban design approximates what used to be called "community planning". A young Jane Jacobs' prescient comment during the 1956 conference comes to mind. "A store is also a storekeeper" she then said, with the implication that her designer colleagues at the conference better remember that a storekeeper is also a citizen, and that citizens have a stake in decisions being made about their environment. Not much follow-up of her point was recorded in the proceedings. It would take another generation to bring this view to the foreground.

The association of urban design and citizen participation was finally the result of the gradual bureaucratization of the planning profession itself. Sometime following the social unrest of the 1960's and a growing consensus about the failures of Urban Renewal, the focus of planning began to shift dramatically from physical planning to process and policy formulation. If the architect and urban designer were hell-bent on producing visions of a better tomorrow, the theory went, then the role of the planner must be dedicated to determining need and rational process, not seeking (the often illusive and sometimes dubious) vision. Indeed, a fear of producing more top-down, failed plans before an increasingly demanding, less patient public led the planning profession to embrace broad participatory techniques and community advocacy. But ironically, the concurrent disengagement from spatial concerns on the part of the planner began to distance the activities of planning from the stuff the beneficiaries of planning wish for most; nicer neighborhoods, access to better places of work and commerce, and special environments to periodically escape everyday pressures related to life or work.

As the planning profession continued to operate in the broader spheres of policy formulation, the focus of planning increasingly appears to the public as abstract, even indifferent to immediate concerns or daily needs. The urban designer who addresses these immediate, often spatially-related concerns, has come to be seen as the professional most attuned to tangible urban problem solving, not as the agent of bold urban transformation. In citizens' minds those who practice urban design are not the 'shapers of cities' -- in large part because such shapers, if they exist, are mistrusted. They are instead custodians of the qualities valued by a community; qualities which the urban designer is asked to protect. Today, it is the urban designer, not the planner, who has emerged as the place-centered professional, with "urban design" often assuming a friendlier, more accessible popular connotation than "planning."

Urban Design as a Frame of Mind

The above list is not intended to be exhaustive and other perspectives can surely be added. For example in the parts of the world that are modernizing rapidly urban design has emerged as an important tool of managing this modernization. Nor is the point of identifying -- and even caricaturing -- the above spheres of urban design to lay claim to vast jurisdictional territory for the discipline. On the contrary, it is to suggest, rather strongly, that instead of moving towards professional specificity, urban design has come to represent -- and its varied practitioners have come to be aligned with -- distinct avenues for engaging and facilitating urbanism. Rodolfo Machado, a colleague at Harvard, offers an appealing (if somewhat rhetorical) definition for urban design as the process of design that produces or enhances urbanity. Is this but an amiable generality?

Perhaps Josep Lluís Sert would be disappointed that half a century following his first conference that no more precise a definition for urban design has emerged. Around the 3rd or 4th of the near-annual urban design conferences that he hosted at Harvard throughout the 1960's and early 1970's he expressed concern about the "fog of amiable generalities" that the conversations had so far produced. He hoped to move past such, but they have persisted.

My own conclusion following a quarter-of-a-century of practicing and teaching urban design is the following. Urban design is less a technical discipline and more a mindset among those, of varying disciplinary foundations, seeking, sharing and advocating insights about forms of community. What binds different urban designers are their commitment to city life, the enterprise of urban-maintenance, and the determination to enhance urbanism. The need for a narrow definition for such a constellation of interests is not self evident. Because of this commitment to urbanism, urban designers distinguish among mandates; realizing that to renew the centers of cities, build new cities, restore the parts of old cities worthy of preservation, and construct equitable growth management programs on the periphery require vastly different

strategies, theories and design actions. There are, indeed, many spheres of urbanistic action for those who are urban minded to dedicate themselves and their work.

Alex Krieger is professor of urban design and chair of the Department of Urban Planning and Design at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, and principal of Chan Krieger and Associates, an architecture and urban design firm based in Cambridge, Massachusetts.