This article appeared in Harvard Design Magazine, Spring/Summer 2008, Number 28. To order this issue or a subscription, visit the HDM homepage at <http://www.gsd.harvard.edu/hdm>.

© 2008 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College. Not to be reproduced without the permission of the publisher: hdm-rights@gsd.harvard.edu.

REVIEWED BY THOMAS BENDER

Recombinant Urbanism

Conceptual Modeling in Architecture, Urban Design, and City Theory
by **David Grahame Shane**

Chichester, West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, 2005

Recombinant Urbanism by David Graham Shane, who teaches urban design at Columbia University, is a book of wide-ranging erudition. Anyone who was delinquent in not reading the proliferating literature about "architecture culture" can, with this book, catch up on that portion focused on the history and theory of city design. There is a particularly strong analysis of Kevin Lynch (more than 100 index entries), showing his many moral and political commitments and the multifaceted character of his work — ranging from something approaching a spiritual vision of cities and nature to close empirical studies, particularly those on which his classic book, *The Image of the City* (1960), was based. Too often, however, we get litanies of urban facts or thumbnail presentations of theories that clutter pages without illuminating the issue or driving the argument. Those moments when Shane speaks in his own voice are marked by compelling explication that, unfortunately, is not evident throughout.

Nor was Shane well served by his publisher and editor at John Wiley's Academy imprint; to my mind they failed to do their parts. The professional skills and responsibility of an editor revolve around his or her commitment to and skill in helping the author find the rhetoric that will connect him with his and the publisher's proposed audience. An editor should have addressed the clutter noted above, and the designer of the book should have thought about how illustrations add essential content before he or she relegated them, at postage-stamp size, to the margins or filled pages with as many as ten small images. One cannot seriously examine such illustrations, nor can (or does) Shane explicate them.

The editor should have questioned the unnecessary (and often implausible) appeal to the prestige of science. Shane repeatedly refers to the implications of

Book Review

the ideas of Darwin and Einstein in ways that would bring a grimace to the face of any intellectual historian. This is doubly regrettable because Darwinism *could* have been brought to bear on Shane's argument. In 1909, the fiftieth anniversary of Darwin's publication of *Origin of Species*, John Dewey published his classic essay, "The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy."[1] Darwin's demonstration of the mutability of the species, Dewey argued, liberated thought from the Platonic norm that identified the true and beautiful with permanence and thus absolutism, opening the way to a better appreciation of an open-ended, contingent universe — one of the points Shane wants to make about planning after Modernism. Shane invokes pragmatism, but does not touch this central idea. Instead the idea he derives from Darwin is "the survival of the fittest," not my idea of how a good city evolves, and not Darwin's idea at all. (The phrase was coined by Herbert Spencer.)

His editor's and publisher's failures notwithstanding, Shane has focused on an important issue. Readers will better understand a crucial transformation in city life and be better prepared as city designers, politicians, and citizens to deal with the emergence of a new kind of city. Shane has identified an important global phenomenon in urban history, although his references, as he acknowledges with some regret, are mostly to the United States and Europe: The city, he argues, is no longer understandable in a holistic way. The center in fact has not held, and the boundaries of the city cannot be specified. There is not even an agreed-on name for the gargantuan urban agglomerations in which we live, no matter what continent we live on. That is a fact worldwide. If this recognition is not unique to him, his special contribution is to address the challenges it poses for urban planning and design.

His basic point is that the Modernist dream of comprehensive planning (or control) is no longer possible. The city is made up of fragments, and the only way to proceed is fragment by fragment, always hoping not to damage other fragments. He says this after rightly criticizing "urban design" as a misnomer, for in practice it is applied only to large projects that often damage the character and design of cities. He prefers, therefore, the phrase "city design," which, he argues, must concern itself with the city in its fullness and interrelationships, even if one's commission concerns only a fragment of the city.

His program for those who would design new cities or intervene in existing cities is founded on three concepts he calls armature, enclave, and heterotopia. The first two are clear and common enough. Cities are a combination of armatures, or communication and transportation networks, usually streets. These streets connect enclaves, which he defines as public squares or other central but single-purpose assemblage spaces. Shane offers a rich catalogue of possibilities for thinking about these elements. The surprise here is his third element: heterotopia, which for him is any large and complex monument or public institution "standing out" from the urban fabric. He gives as examples a hospital or a "monumental church" (85). Shane comments that "over the years, many students have asked me why I place so much emphasis on heterotopias" (305). I cannot but ask the same. While he says he is only loosely following Michel Foucault, from whom he has taken the word, he has taken it so far that it bears no relation to Foucault's meaning, while he continually invokes Foucault's authority. For Foucault heterotopia was not a functional space or even any specific space. It was rather a social conjuncture that created, perhaps only temporarily, an alternative site where a social group, particularly constituted of marginalized people in the larger society, might imagine and perhaps live by alternative values. Lower Manhattan's *Webster Hall* in its prime, I suspect, might have represented heterotopia to Foucault. But Shane equates heterotopia with "diversity," that sacred but much diluted word of our cultural moment. He goes further, identifying heterotopia with any multiuse structure. Hence Sullivan and Adler's dignified *Auditorium Building* in Chicago qualifies, but so does David Childs's appalling *Time Warner Center* at Columbus Circle, where on the upper floors mass media of global scope are managed by a corporate elite, while on the glitzy lower floors is a paradise for the rich offering, among much more, *prix fixe* meals reaching $500 before wine.

"Top down" planning is excoriated by Shane, and he criticizes the Modernist tendency toward such planning. He believes that Kevin Lynch, who is celebrated in this book, had a compelling vision of participation. In fact, one of the strengths of the book is that it shows how deeply Lynch believed in the capacity of ordinary people to shape their environment. Yet Shane never describes any particular example in detail or in operation, nor does he address questions of power or the institutional mechanisms available (or lacking, for that matter) to advance this democratic agenda. Interestingly, the word *citizen* does not appear in the index, and I do not recall coming across it in the text. That is revealing, for citizenship identifies the modern locus of sovereignty, the final authority. But Shane's democracy only asks the architect / city designer to "listen" to the public. That is more than Robert Moses was willing to do, but it still leaves the architect as "the decider," to use a neologism of our own time. Something is not being thought through here; he undermines the participation he celebrates in Lynch. He is not alone in this blindness. The hard question, too rarely faced and pressed, is how much participation can expert knowledge accommodate.

Dewey is relevant here. References to pragmatism appear early in the book, but they do not refer in any serious way to philosophical pragmatism. None of the key texts of that tradition of thinking and social practice is noted, let alone explicated for architects. Is that a problem? Yes. Shane relies on pragmatism's recently increased stature as a body of thought as a mere rhetorical asset. Should I be surprised? The recent fascination with pragmatism in architecture theory seems not to include a felt need to inquire deeply into the philosophy's basic principles and texts. Architecture theory's relation to philosophy is at best parasitical, perhaps even opportunistic. But had architects

© 2008 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College. Not to be reproduced without the permission of the publisher

who are concerned with democracy, as Shane assuredly is, gone to John Dewey himself, they might have gained some insight into the relationship of the professional-as-expert to democracy, which I will outline below. They might also have noticed that Dewey's metaphysics amounted to a philosophical anthropology that implicated truth in practice and made it contextual, contingent, time-specific, and never to be fully realized. Truth and politics for Dewey thus almost merge as collective quests not for *the* truth but for ever better and more workable truths. Thus Dewey made pragmatism and democracy natural partners. This amounts to an unsettling challenge to professionals.

Dewey's notion was that professionals / experts ought to begin their address to public issues, including city planning, by acknowledging that they are themselves members of that public, not superior to it. Beginning with the common understanding they share with their fellow city dwellers, experts contribute to democratic decision-making (or planning) because of their access to esoteric knowledge and rigorous disciplinary procedures. Drawing upon those resources, the expert is to go back to the public, shifting to using the common language of public life. But the decision must be a collective one; the expert must eschew deciding for others.[2] In a democracy, Dewey once commented, the smart and learned have no more claim to authoritative speech in public than do the holders of great wealth. Taken literally, such a view is difficult to digest. But surely Dewey did mean at least that as a citizen everyone had the right and should have the opportunity to place his or her interests on the table. He believed, perhaps naively, that public conversation among citizens would result in resolution of those interests. The recent response to a set of exhibitions devoted to the career of Robert Moses suggests that architects and developers are impatient with conversation.[3]

Shane's book shines most in its account of Lynch's career and ideas. His account of the Collage City ideas of Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter is both central and highly suggestive. However, it is roughly in the middle of the book, when Shane discusses the work of Paola Viganò, the Italian architectural theorist associated with the Venice school, that we glimpse a possible future. Shane has prepared the way for this discussion with his illuminating accounts of the layering of urban experience explored by Lynch, Rowe, and Koetter, and with his adaptation of the notion of bricolage, taken initially from Claude Lévi-Straus. Viganò's *La Città Elementare* (1999) builds upon the concepts of the "built landscape" and "elementarism," and in Shane's telling it provides a way of linking rationalist planning, history, and chance conjunctures. (This understanding of urban analysis offers the same appeal of linking diverse agents, human and non-human, including both technologies and nature, as does the Actor Network Theory associated with Bruno Latour, which Shane briefly mentions in a different context.[4])

In Shane's words, Viganò's "elementarism is the isolation of 'elements' in a system as discrete objects that maintain constant forms, and the stressing of manipulation of the combinational and geometric relationships between such elements." This allows her to acknowledge layers of history as well as contemporary synchronic relations among urban elements, all shaping form and experience. "Viganò's layered elementarism is thus descended from Alberti's theory of architecture as a combinational matrix of potential elements or signs that can be manipulated" (158 – 159). Drawing upon Rosalind Krauss's idea of "sculpture in the expanded field" in the work of Robert Smithson,[5] Viganò, who relies upon a "reverse field concept of designing with the open 'space body' between buildings," develops an analysis of suburban extension that "finds many linear patterns in this new field." She is "able to see the city as a bricolage of patterns of activity constructed over time by different actors with different goals, creating layers and patches of urban order." Like Latour's concern for reframing "the social" as a matter of "assemblage and disassemblage," she explores the "disintegration and composition of urban space" (160 – 161). She also develops three useful analytical distinctions to describe the relation of the different fragments of the city, explaining them by using game pieces: first, dominoes, which touch only at edges but extend over time and space; second, chess pieces, which do not touch but which are related to each other by the abstraction (or fact) of the grid that offers to them both constraint and freedom; and, third, jigsaw puzzle pieces, which come together to form an overall pattern (162).

These are all strong metaphors that ought to help students, whether as urban scholars or actual designers. Both make distinctions and find order among the many fragments of urban experience. Shane's book, in fact, is itself a work of fragments or a composition formed out of intellectual history, urban history, and what the denizens of architecture culture call "theory." Intellectual and urban historians would find problematic many of his assertions and generalizations. No problem, it seems, for Shane does not identify his analysis with them. His aim is the generation of theory. If the value of theory is to stimulate the imagination, the book succeeds, if only for the plethora of ideas packed into it. And here we see, I think, the teacher behind this book. Some of the limitations of the book may in the classroom better stimulate class discussions.

Yet the ideas seem detached, related more to each other than to the urban world that is presumably the object of inquiry and transformative action. Theory's virtue is to sharpen and enrich one's contact with and manipulation of the world around us, but there is a tendency in academic life to substitute theory for experience, to relate theory to theory, making it a domain for the display of cleverness, not practice — unknowingly and ironically mimicking the intellectual style commonplace in Anglo-American analytical philosophy, a philosophical domain most architectural theorists keep at a distance. This tendency in architecture discourse reminds me of a comment made about a decade ago by an economist at a New York University faculty meeting addressing general education for

© 2008 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College. Not to be reproduced without the permission of the publisher

undergraduates. Opposing the general tenor of the meeting, he declared that he did not want to teach our students about the economy, he wanted rather to teach economics. No wonder that as he spoke a survey of economists sponsored by the American Economic Association revealed that two thirds complained that their discipline was "too unrelated to the real world."[6]

Shane's brief conclusion brings into focus two issues that haunt the book. One concerns the relationship of architecture to the market, or more precisely, corporate capitalism — both the spaces corporations want and the corporate model of development. The challenge of city design, it seems to me, is to bring the art of architecture into fruitful relation with corporate capitalism. This, admittedly, is no easy task, and Shane does not attempt it. But neither silence nor global statements about the evils of capitalism are adequate responses to the challenge. A deeper and more precise understanding of the complexities of architecture as a compound of art, profession, and business is needed. The other issue is also related to contemporary capitalism. Shane seems not only to embrace heterotopia, but also to accept what he acknowledges is an "illusory" form of heterotopia one that is the product of the wrap-around consumerism and sights and sounds of our digital age. We do live in such an age, but I guess I am much less comfortable with it than is Shane. If the Time Warner building is heterotopia, then I am sure that in his grave Foucault is regretting having brought the notion into the world. ☐

NOTES

1. In *The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy and Other Essays in Contemporary Thought*, Larry A Hickman, ed. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, 2007).
2. John Dewey, "Philosophy and Democracy," in *The Middle Works, 1899 – 1924*, JoAnn Boydston, ed., (14 vols.; Carbondale, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 11: 41 – 53; John Dewey, *Experience and Nature* (Chicago: Open Court Press, 1929); and Thomas Bender, *Intellect and Public Life* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), chapter 8 and epilogue.
3. At the Museum of the City of New York, Wallach Gallery at Columbia University, and the Queens Museum. For public reaction, see the first among many articles in New York and the national press, see Robin Pogrebin, "Rehabilitating Robert Moses," *New York Times*, January 23, 2007.
4. Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).
5. In *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985); originally in *October* 8, spring 1979, 31 – 44.
6. Quoted in Thomas Bender, "Politics, Intellect, and the American University, 1945 – 1995," *Daedalus* 126 (Winter, 1997), 16.

© 2008 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College. Not to be reproduced without the permission of the publisher