

Roles and challenges of urban design

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Abstract: This paper provides an analysis of the rising significance of urban design and the challenges it is facing. It places urban design in the wider context of urban development process, and of the growing importance of cities in the global economy. By adopting a dynamic and multi-dimensional perspective, the paper looks at this process from the viewpoints of producers, regulators, and users of the built environment. Urban design is found to make major contributions for each of these groups, which explains its rising but contested significance; being integrated into the mainstream of the development process has generated new challenges for urban design.

The rising significance of urban design

Urban design seems to have found widespread popularity, as evident by its increasing presence in professional journals, government websites, academic debates and popular media. The number of jobs advertised for professional urban designers has risen sharply. Many private consultancy firms now include urban design as one of their key skills. Before 1990, as measured by the International Bibliography of the Social Sciences, there were only 26 publications in the academic journals on the theme of urban design (www.ibss.bids.ac.uk). Since 1990, however, the number has gone up to 407. Another index, the ISI Web of Knowledge, which also covers the sciences as well as arts and humanities journals, shows the rise from a pre-1990 number of 268 publications to a post-1990 number of 494 (portal.isiknowledge.com). On the website of the Office of Deputy Prime Minister, the main UK government agency dealing urban planning and development, there are now 284 pages that refer to urban design (www.odpm.gov.uk). A quick search in Google takes 0.27 second to find 3.3 million entries for 'urban design' (www.google.co.uk). Without the inverted commas, it takes only 0.10 second to generate 73.3 million entries. Only last year, these figures were 0.66 m and 5.6 m respectively; a few years ago, a similar exercise could generate only a handful of entries. There are no fewer than 1.54 m (up from 0.11 m last year) websites for urban design competitions around the world, from Los Angeles to London to Sydney, among others.

While these figures partly reflect the dynamics of the information and communication technology, they are also some indications of the phenomenal growth of urban design as a subject. They show how, particularly since the 1980s, urban design has been moving from the margins of architecture and planning into their mainstream. This poses the question: Why? How can we make sense of this growing attention to the subject matter? How can we account for the rising significance of urban design? This may appear a strange question to some; if we do not wish our cities to be shaped in a haphazard way, surely we should design them in the way we want them to be. But until recently, urban design was treated as a novelty, an exercise in beautification of public spaces, showing the limited significance attached to designing cities. This paper tries to find an answer to these questions by searching for an

explanation for the rise of urban design. This answer, which by no means is comprehensive, would be relevant to those outside the urban design field, who may watch this dramatic rise with interest or suspicion, and to those inside the field, who are interested in developing the subject further through analysis and debate.

A multi-dimensional and dynamic perspective

To find an answer, a framework is needed for analysing the role of urban design in the process of urban change. This framework requires, first, to understand whether there are structural changes in the urban context, which are parallel to, and a context of, the shifting attitudes to urban design. Second, it requires us to consider the role that urban design plays in this changing context and see whether this role has any particular significance. To do this, it is important to analyse the significance of urban design not from a single viewpoint, but from the viewpoints of the various actors involved in city design and development. In Nietzsche's words, 'the *more* eyes, different eyes, we can use to observe one thing, the more complete will our "concept" of this thing, our "objectivity", be.' (Quoted in Schacht, 1996:159). It is also necessary to take into account a wide range of considerations. Therefore, a multi-dimensional viewpoint is required, which combines political, economic and cultural aspects of urban design and development. This viewpoint needs to be dynamic, so that it can address the process of urban change: integrating a time dimension into the process of spatial change, rather than only focusing on a particular place or a single moment in this process (Lefebvre, 1991).

To employ a multi-dimensional and dynamic perspective, i.e., to see the phenomenon in its *dynamic multiplicity*, we will need to see urban design as part of the broader context of urban development process, and analyse the significance of urban design from the perspectives of regulators, producers, and users of the urban space. The analysis, therefore, focuses on the changing context of cities, the role of urban design in this process of change, and the political, economic, and cultural roles it plays as understood by different stakeholders involved. This also spells out some of the challenges that urban design is facing.

Each of these groups in turn includes a number of different groups of actors. Regulators mainly refer to the government and its role in regulating the economy, which in the urban development process is mainly reflected in planning. Producers include those who build the city, predominantly developers and their financiers and teams of professionals, including designers and construction companies. Users generally refer to those who visit, work, or live in the city and use the urban space in some capacity. This is a broad category that refers to the urban society and should not be seen as a functionalist reduction of citizens' roles and interests. The use of the terms producers, regulators and users should, therefore, not be seen as narrowing down our relationships to urban space to an instrumental and economic one of mere production and consumption. Nevertheless, as we focus on the process of urban

development, these terms may helpfully describe the roles that groups of actors play in this complex process.

The separation of the three perspectives does not mean a mechanical separation, as there are overlaps in the roles and functions of these groups: producers and regulators will also be users (though not necessarily the same space that they produce or regulate), users can also be regulators (though mainly mediated through public institutions), while producers can also be regulators (especially when dealing with large scale developments) etc. Nevertheless, this separation allows us to analyse the process in terms of the general dynamics of these groups and their interests, as there are distinctive patterns that characterize each group's role in the urban development process. There will always be, of course, exemptions to these general dynamics, as individuals, firms and organizations may pursue a potentially endless variety of diverse routes. Nevertheless, the nature of the urban development process has taken shape in such a way that these broad patterns in its constitution are discernible.

The changing context of cities

The first stage in understanding the significance of urban design is recognizing the major structural changes that cities are going through. It is now a widely held view that cities are finding a new significance in a globalizing world (Sassen,2002; UN,2001; Olds,2001; Short & Kim,1999; Clark,1996). A number of substantial trends link the cities together worldwide. The turn of the millennium has coincided with the overall balance of global population to change in favour of urbanism, as more than half the world now lives in urban areas. According to the Executive Director of the United Nations' Centre for Human Settlements, the turn of the millennium has been marked by a significant shift, a new urban revolution (Toepfer, 1999, p.2). Some time after the turn of the new century, for the first time in human history the number of urban dwellers has been more than those in rural areas. In other words, more than half the world's population now lives in cities, growing to become twice the size of rural populations in the next three decades.

The rise of the city is evident almost everywhere in the world. In the west, industrialization in the nineteenth century concentrated large numbers of people in cities. But even now, when populations are relatively stable and growing old, some cities are still growing as a result of change in urban and regional economies from manufacturing industry to the service sector. In the rest of the world, where industrialization is on its way or where it has been bypassed, the city is gaining significance. Here major demographic and economic change has released large numbers from the countryside, which no longer could support the surplus populations, and has enlarged the population of cities to unprecedented levels. In all cases, it seems the cities are growing in size and significance, in political, economic and cultural dimensions.

Alongside this trend, there has been a faster pace of globalization, which has connected many of these towns and cities together through new information, communication, and transport technologies. This has made it possible to develop a new division of labour across the world, whereby economic activities move around in search of higher productivity and lower costs. The impact of this new division of labour has been industrialization in some low-wage areas and deindustrialization in many higher wage areas, creating large distances that separate production from management and exchange of goods. As a result, many western cities have lost their manufacturing industrial function, and are actively seeking a new economic role. Change from manufacturing to the service sector does not mean that manufacturing industries have disappeared; rather they are relocated to lower wage parts of the world, turning the cities in the west to centres of innovation and control, as well as exchange and consumption. This is a structural change in the economic base of the city, which becomes reflected in its social and spatial organizations. It is an overall change in which the roles of those who produce, regulate and use the city have changed substantially.

What is mistakenly considered as a place-less process of globalization takes shape and unfolds in the city. This happens not only in the cities of the rich countries, but also in the cities of the middle and low income countries, where there is a concentration of the elite and decision makers. In other words, the process of globalization often occurs where people are concentrated, in cities, and not in the cyberspace or amidst some mysterious flows from one continent to the other. It is in cities that decisions are made and communicated, where the main economic, political and cultural activities take place, and where most people live and work. This embeddedness, therefore, makes the material conditions of cities a crucial component of the globalization process.

Throughout history, the city has been shaped by the most powerful forces of the time, and today's cities are no exception. Two centuries ago, when the industrial society was taking over, it dramatically changed the configuration of cities, turning them into workshops of the world. Now it is the service society's turn to shape the city in its own image, to turn it into a locus of exchange; for ideas, goods and services to be traded via the abstract medium of money, in face-to-face or mediated marketplaces, which are supported and interconnected by new technologies. In its broadest sense, urban design contributes to the task of adjusting the city to this structural change, by creating a new spatial organization and projecting a new image that befit a new society. In this sense, it is one of the tools that are developed to facilitate the change by shaping the urban fabric in new ways.

This is, however, by no means an unproblematic adjustment. A structural change of this magnitude is made possible through the exercise of economic and political power in shaping the new urban conditions, through making particular choices, giving priority to particular visions and strategies, and privileging some individuals and groups over others. Such a

change improves life chances for some, and undermines others, causing controversy and resentment. The results of the adjustments are not inevitable either. A major process of urban transformation can take place in a variety of ways, and the sort of general approach that has emerged in urban design is just one of these possible ways.

Building the city: producers' perspective

If this is a major structural change in all aspects of societies, what significance can urban design have? How can urban design influence this level of change? To answer this question, we need to locate urban design within the context of urban development process, and see what roles it plays, what gaps it fills and what meanings it carries (Madanipour,1996). Urban development is the process that transforms cities, and is an essential part of the economy (Lefebvre,1991; Harvey,1985a;1985b). As urban development is a central part of the process of urban change, we may start to see the potentially strategic place that urban design occupies in shaping the city of future.

As far as the producers of built environment are concerned, there are at least five areas that urban design makes a significant contribution to the urban development process: it addresses a new division of labour, shapes the product, coordinates the production process, stabilizes the market conditions, and helps the marketability of the product.

1. A new division of labour

Structural changes in the economy have altered the division of labour in city building. The mid-twentieth century saw the increasing role of the state in city building, through urban renewal and redevelopment schemes and public housing development. Planning and design at the urban scale seemed to be entirely within the remit of the government. However, as the state started to withdraw from many of its activities, retreating into a regulatory role, urban development became mainly a task for the private sector. Urban-scale projects undertaken by the private sector now needed urban-scale design.

There have been doubts about the cost effectiveness of urban design, whether in public realm improvements or in management of urban development. Many key stakeholders, however, seem now to appreciate the added value of urban design in economic, social and environmental terms (Carmona et al,2002). Private sector developers and investors have had varying degrees of interest in urban design, as this varies according to their size, specialism, and the market conditions. Traditionally, volume house builders have tended to focus on housing units rather than urban issues, which they have seen beyond their remit (Rowley,1998). Short term business cycles have often prevented long term views, hence lack of interest by developers and investors in urban design (DoE/RICS,1996; Rowley,1998). However, the longest period of economic growth in modern Britain, between 1992 and 2005, has generated the levels of confidence necessary for long term planning and investment,

making masterplanning and urban design not only desirable, but also necessary. The size and scale of development have increased significantly. The UK government's Communities Plan revolves around the development of hundreds of thousands of new homes, both inside cities and outside them in new settlements and towns, hence requiring urban design.

Urban design also filled a professional gap. Following the perceived failure of postwar urban renewal schemes, architects and planners lost interest in imagining the future shape of the urban environment, creating a professional gap that needed to be filled. There was a need for a group of professionals who could imagine the future of the city in new ways, moving beyond the single site, which was the main concern of the private developer, and at a more concrete level than the large-scale maps and diagrams of urban and regional planners (Tibbalds, 1988).

2. Shaping the product

Any design activity produces instructions for the making of something. As Kevin Lynch (1981:290) defined it, design is, 'the playful creation and strict evaluation of the possible forms of something, including how it is to be made'. This would also apply to city design, where there is a need for a clear set of ideas about how space should be organized, what forms it should take and what functions it should perform. As an integral part of the urban development process, therefore, urban design shapes the urban space.

A quick glance at the necessary urban design skills identified by the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) may help us find some clues. It enlists the areas of masterplanning, housing market renewal and growth, infill and mixed use development in urban centres, as well as considerations for liveability in cities. Together, they seem to amount to a wide range of skills necessary to manage the development and change of urban fabric. After an initial period in which urban design was narrowly defined as merely dealing with appearances, there is now a growing appreciation that it also, and more importantly, deals with organization of urban space and processes of shaping cities. This is particularly evident in the UK government's changing approach to design issues during the last two decades. The latest thinking from the government sees design as addressing 'the way places work as well as how they look' (ODPM, 2004:23). Design has, therefore, been redefined, from merely aesthetic issues that should be left to developers and designers alone, to a much broader definition, which requires proper public attention.

3. Coordinating the development process

On the basis of an agreed scenario for the future shape of the product, the development agency is then capable of mobilizing a large number of actors, each with a separate role to play in a sequence of phases, around a clear set of instructions. The role of urban design, particularly at larger scales such as masterplanning, becomes a guiding and coordinating role. It provides a route map that connects initial intentions to final outcomes, and offers a

clear and tangible visualization of that outcome, around which a complex production process can be organized.

4. Stabilizing market conditions

Structural changes in the economy have promoted a freer reign for the private sector. Limitations on wealth creation, it was argued, needed to be removed, including excess regulation and control. This generated the enterprise culture of the 1980s and a new dynamism in the private sector. However, while the development industry was demanding a relaxation in planning restrictions, we see a surge in the popularity of urban design in the industry. The question that emerges is: Why should the markets be interested in new ways of managing change, if the ethos of the new era was to reduce the regulatory pressures on market forces? Too much regulation and too much state intervention were seen by neoliberal politicians as the reasons behind economic stagnation, which needed to be removed. This view continues to be reflected in the pressures on the planning system, which is expected to be reformed so as to facilitate development, rather than stifling it with undue regulation and red tape. Surely, urban design is a form of planning, and the attitude of the developer and the designer seems to show a desire to reduce rather than increase regulatory pressures.

Certainty is one of the key demands of the development industry (Syms,2002). Bringing certainty and structure to the market is one of the key tasks of urban design, through masterplanning and promoting and guiding investment in public infrastructure. Though the market was reinvigorated through its new relationship with the state, it was also in upheaval, and needed a new framework that enabled individual actors to reduce their risks and feel safe in their transactions. Long periods of growth, especially in the 1990s, created surpluses in the economy, which needed to be absorbed in the built environment. Furthermore, the large size of development companies and their massive productive capacity make the production of large parts of cities in short period of time possible (Whitehand,1992). By guiding the urban development process through masterplanning, urban design provides a framework for managing resources available in a particular part of the city. In articulating a vision for the future and how it can be implemented, urban design can be a source of certainty for the market and support for the state.

The nature and effectiveness of masterplanning vary according to the conditions of the development process, depending on the length of time and the size of a development, and whether it envisages a total design of an environment or a framework for managing development. In its last incarnation, masterplanning was judged to be an inflexible tool. Yet this rigidity is also a source of its current appeal, as it provides a degree of certainty for those involved: providers, regulators and users of the built environment.

Masterplanning and public realm improvements are instruments of confidence building in the private sector, by showing how things could happen and where their investment may be placed. Developing a framework within which the market can operate and providing the necessary safeguards are the reasons why the market has responded positively to urban design, as it reduces the risks of investment and helps secure the value of property. The transfer of costs and risks onto the public purse is why developers welcome public space improvements conducted by public authorities. These improvements create a level of security for investment in newly opened markets of the inner city, where regeneration activities aim to bring underused land and labour back to the marketplace. Such transfer, however, has been controversial, especially in earlier urban regeneration phases, when property-led regeneration was being criticized for its narrow remit (Healey et al,1992).

5. Marketing the development

The interest of the development industry in urban design can be partly explained by its acknowledgement of the economic value of design in an affluent society (Press and Cooper,2003). Design is a sign of social status and good aesthetic taste, providing an added bonus to the products in the marketplace that carry a designer's labels. Brand consciousness in a variety of consumer products, from items of clothing to cars and holiday destinations, is a major phenomenon in many societies today. In the mass consumption society, this is the way individuals can distinguish themselves from the rest, feeling good about themselves by acquiring a status in the eyes of the others. In a visual culture that pays particular attention to appearances (Evans & Hall,1999), design provides a selling point, particularly in the better off sections of society, who can afford designer labels in high cost items such as living and working space. As the market becomes more sophisticated through increased disposable incomes and the rising standard of living, it is only natural that developers wish to pay more attention to the wishes of the market, which include better design.

But better design is not only a sign of status. It also deals with better quality of the built environment, in the way that its constituent parts are well thought through and their relationships with each other and with the urban context are properly understood. A sophisticated market is interested in better quality products, which can be partly ensured through the use of design.

Managing the city: regulators' perspective

As far as the city's public authorities are concerned, whether as players at the local scene or at the global marketplace, it is possible to identify at least four areas in which urban design finds significance: making the city more competitive, helping shape the future of the city, managing change, and helping develop better governance arrangements.

1. Making the city more competitive

In the new knowledge economy, cities have found a new significance as nodes for innovation and communication. This is why cities are becoming the focus of attention by decision makers, who see their renaissance as a necessary condition for economic and social development (Urban Task Force, 1999; 2005). The changing context of the city has had a profound impact on the nature of its economy and society, as well as its politics. In globalized economies, where resources can move with some ease from one place to another, cities are expected to act as if they are firms in search of new business opportunities (Touraine, 1995). They compete with each other for attracting investment, whether through the relocation of firms or through attracting tourists and investors. The city authorities, therefore, find themselves as managers of these 'firms' which means, following the logic of business management, being engaged in product development and marketing. In the city, this translates into developing the necessary infrastructure and promoting the city.

On the one hand, the process of economic liberalization has taken away much of the state's ability to shape localities directly, as production of space is essentially within the remit of the private sector. Hence, the private sector at the local and regional level has found a more significant role in the governance of urban regions. New agencies at different levels and with different scopes have created a fragmented landscape of decision making, which shapes the conditions of life in an area in new ways. On the other hand, globalization has opened up the marketplace to competition from elsewhere, which means these local and regional players are not necessarily in control either. They are therefore expecting the local state to support them in the global marketplace, by promoting the locality, by investing in the infrastructure, and by trying to change the image of the area.

The promotional role of the city authorities involves placing their city on the international map as a desirable destination for investors, in effect marketing the city (Ashworth & Voogd, 1990; Smyth, 1994). City promotion takes place through attempts at re-imaging the city; many cities try to change the lingering image of industrial decline to a new and dynamic one. By emphasizing their historical heritage, as well as their brand new infrastructure, they hope to convey a completely different image that appeals to a wide range of better-off potential visitors and investors. One of the roles of urban design has been helping the city authorities to make this re-imaging. Either by employing superstar designers, or by emphasizing flagship projects and newsworthy initiatives, cities have tried to signal the change of their conditions and their intentions for future development. In a competitive global space, design has become a means of becoming distinguishable from others, a means of product differentiation. It is seen to help the image of cities being transformed from a place of industrial workers to one in line with the demands of the new white collar urban populations. Big splashes in the media that can change the image of a place in the world are one of the major expectations of urban authorities when they employ big name designers.

Place marketing not only provides a competitive edge in the global competition, it also secures advantages over the local competition from other cities and suburban developments, such as shopping malls and business parks (Warnaby and Medway,2004). As cities search for a new economic base, particular sectors of the economy, such as retail or leisure are helped to expand, promoting retail-led or culture-led urban regeneration (Dixon,2005; Lowe,2005; Julier,2005). To compete with suburban shopping malls, city centres have recreated pedestrian shopping precincts, have engaged in environmental improvements, and controlling the movement of motor cars. A new urban economy requires a new physical environment to fit the purpose, hence the role of urban design in securing this transition.

Product development has taken the form of creating new public infrastructures, whether through developing new transport networks or public space improvements. By using public arts and development of cultural industries, a physical and cultural infrastructure is developed to help make the city a more attractive place for living and working. Urban design is a major vehicle of helping develop such infrastructure that creates both symbolic and practical dimensions to a changing city.

This is a complete change of role for public authorities, from providers to enablers. In urban development, this means that city authorities are expected to put in place the necessary frameworks, which can support the private developers to provide the necessary spaces. This is in sharp contrast to the postwar conditions of large-scale public works, which reshaped many cities in fundamental ways. The role of the public authorities has thus changed from those who produce the city to those who promote and regulate its production. Urban design has found significance as a means of promoting the city and guiding and regulating the production of its space.

This is, however, a contested process, as product development and promotion needs to target resources, privileging some sectors, images, conditions, and users over others. The role of the public authority becomes more partisan than before, less able to show its concerns for all members of its constituency. Like the relationship between the board and shareholders in private companies, it is the larger shareholders that hold more votes. Deleting the images and conditions of the industrial past, and dealing with the casualties of the process of economic transition, has been a particularly painful process, turning cities into battlegrounds for the control of a palimpsest.

2. Shaping the future

As global patterns of culture emerge, localities are under pressure to develop a sense of local distinction, both in cultural and economic terms. Localities need to show how they can compete with other localities to attract investment and attention, as well as places with which

the local population can identify. More than any other time in history, therefore, societies need carefully developed directions for their future growth. By promoting civic pride, local populations are encouraged to maintain emotional links with their environment, rather than abandoning it to deteriorate. Local authorities can then justify their role if cities are viable enterprises, rather than bankrupt and dilapidated places.

Visions are, therefore, significant in the sense that they can ensure a degree of control over what is often felt as uncontrollable forces. The UK government's key planning policy document (Planning Policy Statement 1) asks the local planning authorities in their spatial plans to 'set a clear vision for the future pattern of development' (ODPM,2005, para 32i). Localities may feel powerless in attracting resources or channelling them into desired paths. In the past, comprehensive planning was used to prepare and manage for any possible change. But more and more it became clear that predicting and controlling all forces for long are impossible or rigid and undesirable tasks. Visions are now used for localities to define flexibly what sort of future they wish to have, rather than being at the mercy of the forces of globalization, only responding in ad hoc ways, as if it were the weather conditions, or being too rigid as to miss new opportunities for their future development.

For a locality, having a vision is therefore to have a sense of controlling its destiny in the age of global players, providing a sense of optimism and forward looking, rather than helplessness in the lap of gods. Management literature encourages firms to develop a mission statement that can focus the way in which a company operates and can be communicated clearly to the outside world, as well as to its employees. In similar ways, cities and nations are developing visions, to clarify their role in an increasingly interdependent and competitive global space.

But visions and mission statements can be merely a combination of general sentences that have little to do with the realities of a place. It becomes important, therefore, to recognize that visions should be embedded in concrete situations, bringing together the potential fragments caused by social, economic and technological change and confronting the challenges of globalization. This embeddedness often means paying attention to the spatiality of the vision that it is prepared for a particular place and people. The role of urban design is to add flesh to the bones of broad visions and general policy statements; it offers the chance of imagining what the future might look like. As societies are fragmented and stratified, however, agreement on a single vision is always a difficult, if not impossible task, with a result that is often contested along the social faultlines (Holden and Iveson,2003).

3. Managing change

Benefits of good design, according to a previous UK government planning advice, included its 'help to secure continued public acceptance of necessary new development' (DTLR,2001, para 15). This obviously draws on the tension between development and society, whereby the

government and the industry see the need for change and the society does not. The question that arises is whether design is seen as expertise or as nice packaging. Public acceptance could be secured through reassuring them that the matter is being dealt by the 'experts', i.e., the designers; or that design is an aesthetic device to make a development acceptable where otherwise it could be objected to by those affected by it. In both senses, it seems that design is a helpful tool for development-friendly authorities that try to reduce the tensions between exchange value and use value, between development and conservation, between economy and society.

The traditional method of regulating the production of space has been the planning system. This system, however, has been under pressure from two fronts. From the economic side, there has been a demand for reducing the barriers to the operation of the market. This has been a constant feature of the planning system ever since the pressures for economic liberalization took over the political scene in the 1980s, and has continued to this day. Urban design has been a part of a broader movement towards a document-led planning system, which provides a degree of certainty for the market, while limiting the state's intervention in the economy. The planning system has also been under pressure from the social side, to adopt a more socially inclusive approach, to show more sensitivity to the needs of local communities, and to care for the environment. This pressure has also been a feature of the planning system after the perceived failure of the postwar urban redevelopment schemes. As a result, sustainable development has been adopted as the core principle underpinning UK planning, in which the needs of economic development are to be balanced by social cohesion and environmental protection and enhancement (ODPM,2005, para3). Urban design's emphasis on public spaces and environmental sustainability is partly a response to some of these demands. In fragmented and polarized societies, the role of public space can be significant in promoting social integration and tolerance, facilitating the co-presence of diverse groups who otherwise may not even be aware of each other (Madanipour,2003).

The management of urban development changed from being based on long-term comprehensive planning to providing a regulatory framework for fixed-term projects. Urban design was seen initially as the appropriate vehicle for such a change, as it provided the necessary framework for a project. The planning system was changed to show more flexibility towards urban development, and more sensitivity towards urban design. Urban design was first considered as a marginal area of activity merely interested in the appearance of places, or at worst as an outside intervention representing the developers' interest and damaging the integrity of the planning system. However, as public funds have become available after a long period of economic growth, these funds are channelled into the built environment. As the number and size of projects have increased and their duration longer, masterplanning has emerged to cater for the higher degree of complexity that this has brought about. As the number of stakeholders in the governance of urban regions has multiplied, the emphasis both

at the strategic and local levels has shifted to producing visions that can shape the future of the locality. Urban design thus has been embraced as part of the planning process, as evident in the changing documentation and advice from the central government and the changing attitudes of the local governments. There has been a change in the planning system, to become more plan-based, more forward looking and visionary, and more interested in the qualities of places, all features that it shares with urban design. As there has been pressure on planning to become more innovative and development-friendly, it has become more akin to urban design. According to the UK national planning policy, 'Good planning is a positive and proactive process, operating in the public interest through a system of plan preparation and control over the development and use of land' (ODPM,2005, para 2). 'Good design', meanwhile, 'ensures attractive usable, durable and adaptable places and is a key element in achieving sustainable development.' (ODPM,2005, para 33). The two are so close that, 'Good design is indivisible from good planning' (ODPM,2005, para 33).

4. Contributing towards good governance

In liberalized economies, city authorities are expected to withdraw from extensive intervention in the economy, and limit their activities to regulation and support. This has created a fragmentation of authority, whereby many more actors are engaged in shaping the political economy of urban regions. While this has produced some flexibility for the market, it has generated the need for some form of management that can enable an efficient operation of the market and ensure achieving a higher quality of life for citizens (Sellers,2002).

This change in the overall governance, from a powerful state to a group of stakeholders, has profound effects on the management of urban regions (Madanipour et al,2001). New mechanisms were needed to ensure these diverse stakeholders could work together effectively and efficiently. The size and complexity of public authorities, which are subdivided along functions and sectors, also created a diversity of public actors with diverse directions. The project-based nature of urban development, and the multiplicity of stakeholders meant space could become the focus of attention and action. This is why neighbourhoods and 'sustainable communities' have become a subject of interest by the UK government, following a long line of place-based policies such as Enterprise Zones, City Challenge, Health and Education Action Zones, etc. Place allows the range of actors to collaborate in partnership on particular tasks. It produces tangible outcomes for politicians and business managers alike, to show the usefulness of the exercise to their electorates and shareholders.

Urban design is an effective tool to develop place-based visions and strategies, which can be used as instruments of good governance, bringing together a diverse range of parties and allowing them to agree on a common programme of action and to act in unison. This encourages the collaboration of functionally divided public authorities and the private, voluntary and community organizations. This is where the debates about governance and

public realm are related, as different facets of the same issue: the demand for making connections where few existed, to make a sustained operation possible where radical change had created fragmentation and multiplication of agencies, needing new frameworks to work individually and together.

Living in the city: users' perspective

In the urban design literature, it is often the user that is the focus of attention, rather than the producer or the regulator. Yet so far we have seen that these two groups have good reasons to be in favour of urban design. We have seen how urban design can contribute to the exchange value of a place. Can urban design make an equal contribution to its use value? What are the reasons for the users of the built environment to give prominence to urban design? It is possible to argue that most users are not even aware of an area of activity called urban design; they would, however, know more about places and their qualities.

These qualities can be summarized, following Vitruvius (1999), to be in how well a place is built, how it functions, and how it looks. These are very broad categories and each can contain a wide range of sub-categories. In particular the two areas of function and appearance, which roughly correspond to practical and symbolic values of a place, are the areas where urban design's significance can be observed.

1. Improving how the place functions

The key point in the analysis of users is their diversity, and the different contexts in which they are embedded (Bourdieu,2000). In terms of their economic power, their social disposition, and their political influence, the users of the built environment vary widely, and therefore cannot be considered to have a single line of interest in urban design and urban environment. Age, gender, ethnicity, income, lifestyle, education and health are some of the lines that separate individual circumstances from one another, diversifying their relationship with the urban space. As such, urban design and its roles are contested along the lines that stratify society, and the success or failure of urban design and development depends on how far they are able to cross these lines and serve large sections of their users.

Urban design can change the spatial organization of the city, and consequently how it works. Wherever urban societies have become more affluent, they have demanded better quality places. Urban improvement schemes are partly a response to this demand, and partly meeting the challenge of restructuring the urban space to fit the restructured economy, creating urban spaces that are fit for a new urban society.

Urban spaces are multi-purpose places, and the more they meet these diverse purposes, the more successful they tend to be. Urban design has been articulating and promoting mixed use and pedestrian-friendly environments, which are some of the essential features of

successful urban places (Tibbalds,1992). A most significant point has been providing places that are commonly accessible, both physically and socially.

As new technologies and new forms of living and working have spread across the globe, cities are transformed to accommodate these changes. Much of this transformation causes the city to decentralize and disintegrate, as vast, low-density suburbs are developed while central areas decline, and telecommunication and the new nature of work challenge face-to-face contacts and lifestyles. Those in the industrialized countries, who used to live according to industrial patterns of working and living, or those in the rest of the world, who used to live according to agrarian routines of life, are both under pressure to adjust to the new patterns of life in the new global economy. While some agrarian societies are getting used to the more rigid temporal and spatial routines of manufacturing industry, the former industrial societies are busy learning to live with the higher degree of flexibility that the service sector jobs require. These include flexibilities that reduce the rigidities of working schedules, but may make them longer, or part-time, hours of work in more precarious conditions.

The economic transition from one form to another brings a degree of vulnerability to a large number of people. While many can manage the transition safely, others find it an impasse, sliding down the social scale or becoming trapped in conditions of deprivation and disadvantage. Liberalization of the economy challenges the provision of public goods. The social polarization and fragmentation that is caused by economic restructuring puts forward serious challenges for all areas of urban life.

The challenge of overcoming fragmentation is particularly evident in the social field, where economic liberalization coincided with social polarization and exclusion (Madanipour et al,2003). Socially concerned urban design is one of the ways of addressing this process, by promoting accessible and inclusive environments for many, rather than exclusive places for a few. There are trends in urban design that promote further social segregation, rather than integration, as exemplified by gentrification, exclusive enclaves and by gated and walled neighbourhoods. Much of urban design, however, despite its close association with the market realities of the urban development process, focuses on creating and enhancing nodes for social interaction, which can be seen to be contributing to an inclusive urban space, revealing how urban design is rooted in the utopian and reformist traditions of the past two centuries.

In the structural changes of the economy, the common ground that historically was developed and controlled by the state was undermined. Whether through the decline of the 1970s or the upsurge of the 1980s, the common ground of the public spaces suffered from neglect and decay. Public organizations focused on particular functional tasks, while private developers and designers focused on particular sites, showing no interest in the urban space, which was

everyone's space and no-one's. The new urban design represented a concern for articulating the common ground, campaigning for making connections between what appears to be no more than unrelated fragments.

The need for embedding the principles of democratic decision making, of developing visions for people in localities, and for enhancing the quality of life can be addressed in a variety of ways. Developing public spaces is one of the significant means available to citizens to bring these areas of concern together. As public spaces are most likely to be shared by a large number of people and are very visible nodes of cities, they can become the focus of citizens' vision and action, if the process is open to citizen participation and influence (Madanipour,2003).

There is always a danger for flagship projects to be hijacked by some politicians, who see them as a visible sign of their achievements and therefore a ticket to extend their period in power. In these cases, where a project of this kind becomes a politician's pet project, heavy reliance on this process can indeed be harmful to good governance. Significant programmes such as work on the main public spaces of a city have the potential to help develop a strategic coalition between a wide range of actors, hence widening the sphere of decision making and helping citizens to develop a sense of ownership and control. Pieterse and Julsen (1999:7) identify this as a major area of governance action, where for example the questions of urban space can be linked to socio-economic issues.

As Jacobs and Appleyard (1987) argued, urban design can contribute to liveability, identity and control, access to opportunities, imagination and joy, authenticity and meaning, community and public life, urban self-reliance, and an environment for all. Better designed urban environments, therefore, improve the quality of life for more citizens, offer a wider range of opportunity and choice, add comfort and liveability, and encourage cultural exchange and social integration. At the same time, there is always a danger that in the name of environmental quality, the civil society is ignored through top-down solutions that favour economic development. Furthermore, capital investment could benefit the better off, and the resulting urban environment could be exclusionary, rather than promoting tolerance and integration (Sharp et al,2005).

2. Enhancing the symbolic value of the place

The appearance of a place can act as a series of signs, with psychological and social significance. These signs and symbols can provide aesthetic pleasure for individuals and groups, and as such a well designed urban environment can contribute positively to the psychological wellbeing of a society. In secular affluent societies, aesthetic experience has become increasingly important. A problem, however, is excessive focus on appearance, which can become detached from its substance, to the extent that aestheticization of

everyday life is associated with a consumer culture. Design can become reduced to packaging for the urban environment, used as a consumer item like any other. Another problem is the diversity of taste in such an individualized society, in which the elite has partly lost its power of deciding what constitutes good taste. Affluence and consumerism have flooded the marketplace with endless choice, and therefore any design activity that deals with appearances is permanently contested.

Appearances can also act as a medium of communication between the members of a society by providing social meaning and common experience. Historically, urban spaces have carried symbolic value for citizens, in ceremonies and festivals as well as in protests and conflicts. Particular places and landmarks have been used as symbols of collective identity, or as markers for navigating the city. Well designed urban environments can play a powerful role in generating social meaning for the people of a city, providing a basis for social identities in the globalized, urbanized societies. Living in designed environments provides a symbolic status for the better off users, but urban development affects all social groups, and therefore good design should be available to all, rather than a few.

Much of the future of cities depends on how they are managed. City management, however, has for too long focused on problem-solving exercises through technical and bureaucratic procedures, without due attention to inclusiveness and public participation. Even when visions are developed for the future of a place, they have tended to be variations on global trends, rather than establishing local distinctions; imposed from above, rather than being decided in consultation with people. Urban design has campaigned for place-based visions to support local identities in a global context, as a way of tackling this problem. By opening up the process of decision making to a wider set of participants, a city can help both address its problems and develop social and physical assets for the future of the city. One of the main tools of ensuring wider participation and good governance is careful and participatory development of particular place-based visions. Attention to the public spaces of the city and improving its residential neighbourhoods are some of the aspects of this place-based good governance. These can mobilize resources and engage citizens in helping shape their city's future, help build bridges across social divide and develop a sense of distinctiveness and citizenship.

In the context of spatial fragmentation and dispersal of cities, any place or activity that can physically attract a diverse range of people and can house them in the same place can have a positive effect on social integration. If a place finds a symbolic meaning shared by a large number of people, it has the potential to become a focus of local identity. As modernism has shown, cities everywhere can start to have similar building forms, similar commercial outlets, and similar patterns of urban living and appearance. This may be welcome by some, as it provides for masses across the globe what was only the reserve of a small elite; but it can

also threaten to eradicate local and regional differences. While any number of social institutions can enhance local distinctiveness, the configuration of urban space, and in particular their public places, which are used by a large number of citizens, can make important contributions.

There have been some heated debates on the dichotomy between political economy and cultural economy in the discussions about urban regeneration and urban renaissance (e.g. Latham,2003). In the 1970s, the emphasis was placed on the political economy of the city, as distinctive from the postmodern turn later to cultural issues as the main form of investigating the city. In the 1980s, regeneration schemes were rejected as no more than attempts at gentrification and helping property developers accumulate more capital. Since then, urban regeneration schemes have multiplied and the areas they developed have matured and some are being heavily used by urban populations. Many of the issues that were hotly debated at one point are now set aside, as the economic cycle was on the upward trend for more than a decade. Many regeneration schemes, however, are still seen to favour the middle and higher income groups (Parker & Long,2003). Within the design field, some may consider a dichotomy between the economy and culture to be false, as there is both a functional and a symbolic value to any designed place. Nevertheless, the question remains as to who benefits from these integrated values, and whether there are those who cannot identify with, or utilize them.

Challenges of urban design

We have seen how urban design may broadly make sense for large parts of the three main groups of producers, regulators and users of the built environment. However, there are also serious tensions and challenges that such an apparently rising consensus may contain. One of the characteristics of structural changes in society has been turbulence in institutional roles and relationships. A new division of labour emerged between the state and the market; the withdrawal of the state from a range of activities created a space to be filled by a multiplication of private and third sector agencies. This posed a host of problems, including the question of how to operate in a market where rules of the game seemed to be changing fast or disappearing, how to deliver common goods, how to work with those parts of society that object to this process, how to support those who cannot make the transition safely, and how to maintain the state's legitimacy after reduction in some of its areas of involvement. This was a search for clarifying a new division of labour, to find out where to draw the line between the public and the private, a perennial problem that now needed new thinking. Like any other structural transformation of a system, it had caused a crisis which needed adopting new measures, a fragmented context which needed repair. A range of responses emerged, among which urban design dealt with urban development.

In urban development, these problems of transition from one paradigm to another became partly manifest in intensified cycles of boom and bust, deepened socio-spatial segregation,

and privatization or decline of public realm, the valuable common ground which seemed to be abandoned by all agencies or under threat from the encroachment of private interests. Urban design was a response, in the form of campaigning for making connections, articulating the common ground, and arguing for a socially integrative and environmentally responsible urban form.

Urban design, therefore, has important contributions to make in the making of the city, through its role in the urban development process, contributions that are acknowledged by the three main categories of participants in the process. However, such position of prominence also brings forward some major challenges.

1. Tension between perspectives

The most important challenges that urban design faces are at the intersection of the three categories of producers, regulators and users. Each group's interests and expectations may threaten to rule out the interests and expectations of the others. There is a danger that economic considerations become the main drivers of urban development, giving priority to particular sectors at the expense of others, or equating the needs of the development industry with the needs of citizens. There is also a danger that top-down solutions are adopted in managing the city, driven by elitist assumptions and bureaucratic dynamics, rather than by real economic or social needs. Furthermore, there are major challenges within each category, as these are not homogenous groups and each can be potentially formed of very diverse sub-groups and individuals with their different demands and needs. Another danger, therefore, is to see all users as being similar, and generalizing the features of a particular section of society to measure all the others.

The overall challenge, therefore, is how to strike a balance, so as to achieve a particular aim but not at the expense of others. Where is urban design located in this process, and whose interests and values does it safeguard? As we have seen, it may be located within the producers' camp. But urban designers are themselves users of space, and as citizens they have an interest in the way space production is regulated and controlled. Furthermore, as professionals, their roles and duties are by no means limited to being hired hands of the development industry or marketized local authorities.

While urban design seems to be in line with political and economic demands of cities, its challenges are also social, aesthetic and environmental. Any new development is a challenge to an existing context, able to unsettle an often fragile balance or undermine and displace the vulnerable. The question is then: Is urban design helping or hindering social development; improving quality of life for all or for a few? Does it address social polarization and exclusion or does it exacerbate these? Does its nature allow the public to participate in the process of reshaping cities or is it merely seen as a technical and creative process? Is urban design

capable of addressing the demands of social diversity and aesthetic authenticity or is it creating similar developments everywhere? The way ideas are generated and spread, and the speculative nature of much of the development process have led to a demand to reduce the gap between exchange value and use value, resulting in standardization of design in different places and types of development. Is urban design contributing towards environmental care or is its allegiance more with economic and political agendas?

If the public authorities think and act like private firms, it means their basis for decision making would also be similar to the private sector firms, which is primarily seeking exchange value. This would enable them to meet the demands of the economy, but would reduce their ability to meet some needs of the society, especially that which cannot be met through market mechanisms, which need public support. The remit of the public authority, therefore, is providing use value, and to strike a balance with exchange value, rather than be primarily driven by it. Financial pressures also threaten the quality of work produced by the private sector. The way the financing of development projects is organized makes it necessary for developers to think short term, to make the development cycle faster, so that they avoid paying higher interests to banks. This generates an emphasis on investment return, rather than long term quality of the built environment.

2. Blurring the boundaries and mainstreaming

As we saw earlier, urban planning and urban design are getting closer together in a number of ways. Campaign for urban design continues, but now by government agencies (CABE,2002;2005), rather than merely by visionaries and urban designers themselves. As urban design becomes more and more integrated into the mainstream of urban development, some of its features are shared with urban planning, which has now been transformed to embrace urban design. The Royal Town Planning Institute's vision for planning emphasizes spatiality and the creation of place (rtpi.org.uk). The UK government's approach to planning is also focusing on 'sustainable communities', which brings together the spatial and social aspects of planning (odpm.gov.uk). The new Charter of Athens by the European Council of Planners stresses the role of urban design in the work of town planners (ceu-ectp.org). One of the key messages of the new government approach to planning in the UK is that planning authorities should be more forward looking, rather than only performing regulation and control, by developing visions for the future of their area. It starts by defining planning as the activity that 'shapes the places where people live and work' (ODPM,2005, para 1). The planning system is 'plan-led' (para 8), in the same way that the Urban Task Force had asserted that 'Successful urban regeneration is design-led' (1999, p.49). As urban design has extended its area of concern and as planning has emphasized more forward-looking development of visions and master plans, the two have come closer, even overlapping to some extent. A similar concern integrates urban design more into the agenda of architects, who are now expected to have a better understanding of urbanism. This is a welcome

development, but it may take away the explicit emphasis on urban design, as urban design becomes more mainstreamed in the work of urban planners and architects. As the objectives set out by urban design, such as mixed use, public realm improvement, masterplanning etc. are embraced by the planning system, the distinctiveness of urban design may appear to be less than before.

3. Radicalism, orthodoxy and obsolescence

Transitions into and out of the industrial era created fear and anxiety about the unknown, which became manifest in the rise of Victorian attitudes at the beginning and postmodern sensibilities at the end of this period. Both involved searching for enchantment and a romantic return to some lost periods. Contextualist urban design has been a response to the challenges and shortcomings of modernism, which was essentially driven by the logic of the buildings' interior, leaving the exterior to the motor car, which tore the urban fabric apart, where buildings stood as unrelated objects in vast floating open spaces. For the generations that came after the modernists, there was a need for establishing connections between these fragments, and weave the urban fabric together again.

Design ideas seem to go through a cycle of radicalism, orthodoxy and obsolescence: they emerge as new ideas in response to the needs of the time or as a challenge to the way these needs are met. If successful, these ideas are spread and become widely accepted by other designers and the development industry in general, turning into new paradigms and orthodoxies. These in turn generate critical reactions, which lead to the emergence of a new cycle of ideas.

The chairman of the Design Review team at the UK Commission for Architecture and Built Environment defines 'good schemes by good architects' to be 'inevitably examples of architectural narratives which reinforce the fundamental principles of the design in relation to programme' (Finch,2004:13). Much of current 'official' urban design is an institutionalization of ideas developed over the past forty years. The postwar modernist redevelopment of cities had led to widespread resentment, which was articulated by writers such as Lynch (1960), Jacobs (1961) and others. It took a generation for these critiques of modernism to be widely accepted by academic and professional circles; and government policy eventually caught up with this tide, institutionalizing these ideas into good practice guidance backed up by political and economic support. However, just as postmodern sensibilities in urban design are turning into new orthodoxies, a new wave of modernism is moving to the centre stage, threatening these orthodoxies to become obsolete.

Cities are not static; they constantly change and evolve in new directions. Any new development is a challenge to the current situation, as it can transform the status quo in unprecedented ways. Urban design, however, has emerged as essentially within a

contextualist frame of mind. Most of its tenets are questions of how to treat the context of the city, developing principles and tools to deal with this context (e.g., from Hedman & Jaszewski, 1985 to Peng & Jones, 2004). As urban development activities become more intensive, this contextualist approach inevitably becomes challenged, as indeed the conservationist approach has already been. What are the ways in which urban design can respond to the needs of development without relying too much on preservation of the principles and practices of the past?

Conclusion

The significance of urban design lies in the role it plays in the overall transformation of cities. As political, economic and cultural changes have given a new significance to cities, urban space is being reshaped to accommodate the new urban conditions. In its broadest terms, urban design is the tool of this reshaping, hence its structural significance.

We have seen how urban design is taken seriously by the producers, regulators and users of urban space. For the producers, it reflects a new division of labour among the stakeholders, shapes the built environment, coordinates and leads the development process, stabilizes the market conditions, and markets the development. For the regulators, it helps making the city more competitive, shapes the future of the city, manages its environmental change, and contributes towards good governance by bringing together different actors to participate in the process of developing and implementing a vision for the city. For the users of the city, it improves how the place functions and enhances its symbolic value, even though such values are always contested. However, the three perspectives, and differences within each perspective, can be at odds with each other, creating tensions and incompatibilities. As urban design becomes part of the mainstream and its ideas accepted as orthodoxies, contextualist urban design faces the choice between moving with the times or obsolescence.

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