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Tibbalds, Francis

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# Urban Design— Who Needs It?

## Francis Tibbalds

It is an oversimplification—but in large measure true—to say that in the United Kingdom and other European countries greater emphasis is placed upon “place-making” and the setting for a building than on the building itself. Consequently, we tend to have few great buildings but a lot of nice places. The converse may be observed in many other countries, including the United States. In fact, it’s amusing to photograph a beautiful and/or famous new building and then to step back and photograph the nature of the setting—all too often a proliferation of advertisements and uncared-for public space.

I apologize to American readers for this slightly unkind generalization. But it does enable me to proceed to point out the irony that, despite its rich history of “place-making,” the United Kingdom has largely failed to recognize the importance and value of urban design as a professional and academic discipline. What should have been a central focus or common ground between the environmental professions—architects, engineers, planners, landscape architects, and social scientists—is largely a void, which a handful of us are now trying to fill. In the United States, urban design courses appear strong, journals proliferate, and an Institute of Urban Design has been founded. In the

United Kingdom, academic courses have dwindled to a mere four, which are struggling for financial survival. The independently formed Urban Design Group (founded in 1978) attempts to hold together the like minds and committed individuals here, to hold meetings and conferences, to publish a quarterly journal, and to argue for the much-needed breaking down of the traditional and institutionalized separation between the various professions concerned with the built environment.

This article sets out a few of my thoughts and prejudices about urban design and its value in place-making.

### What Is It?

There is, to my knowledge, no easy, single, agreed definition of urban design. The following alternative attempts at a definition, taken together, do, however, give a reasonably clear picture of what is meant by two words that are not yet universally understood and to many people conjure up images of Cullenesque “cobblestone” and bollards:

The coming together of business, government, development, planning, and design.

The interface between architecture, town planning, and related professions.

The three-dimensional design of places for people

in which to work, to live, and to play, and their subsequent care and management.

The development of proposals for urban sites ranging in size from one to five hundred hectares.

A vital bridge, giving structure and reality to two-dimensional master plans and abstract planning briefs before detailed architectural or engineering design can take place.

The design of built up areas at the local scale, including the groupings of buildings for different use, the movement systems and services associated with them, and the spaces and urban landscape between them, within a context of continuous change in the social, political, administrative, economic, and physical structures of towns and cities.

The creative activity by which the form and character of the urban environment at the local scale may be devised, modified, and controlled in circumstances of social, economic, technological, and/or political change.

And so on.

Some people think of urban design as “lots of architecture” or “the space between buildings” or a “thoughtful municipal policy” or “everything you can see out of the window.” The Social Science Research

Council in the United Kingdom invented a rather more wordy definition of it as “located at the interface between architecture, landscape architecture and town planning, drawing on the design tradition of architecture and landscape architecture and the environmental management and social science tradition of contemporary planning.”

### Who Does It?

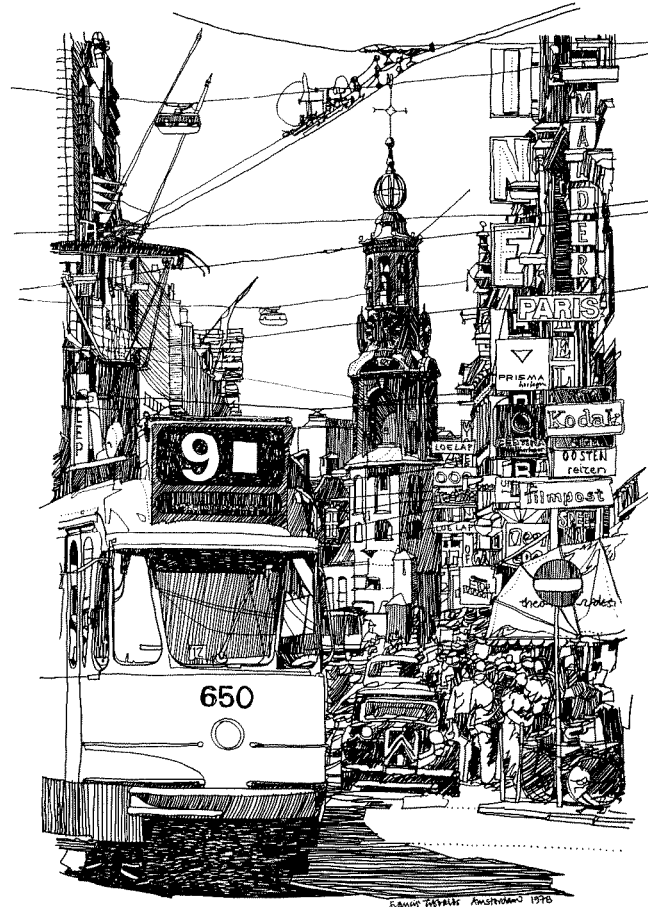
The aspect of urban design most relevant to this article is that it occupies the central ground between the existing recognized environmental professions—architecture, planning, landscape architecture, engineering, transport planning, estate management, and so on.

This wide range of professions are involved either separately or collectively in the practice of urban design. Not only design skills are important, but a sensitive approach to the care and management of places is also required, as is an understanding of the economic and social dynamics of change and the ability to seize opportunities as they are presented.

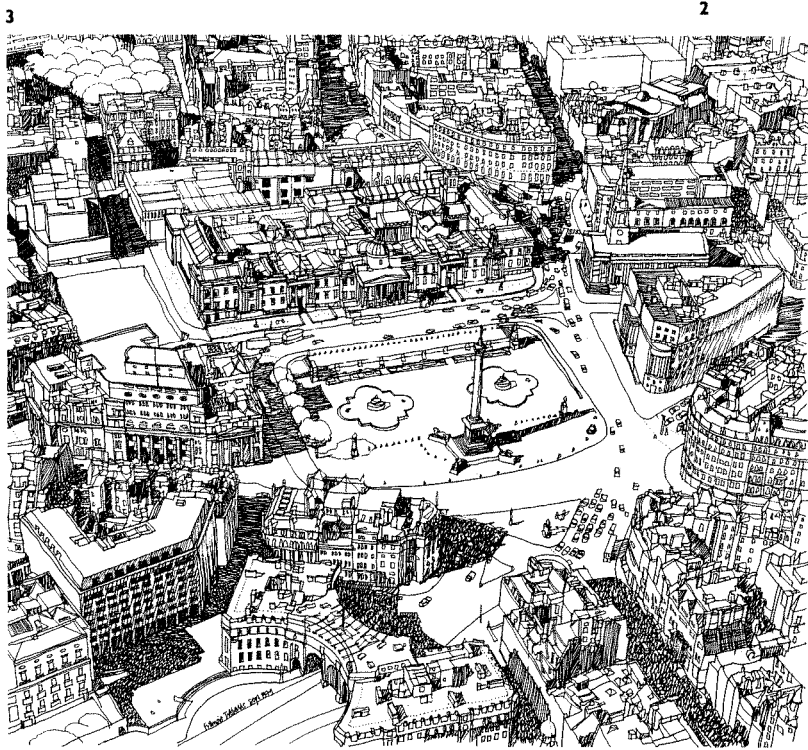
Urban designers do not necessarily need to be architects, although historically many have been. They can equally well be town planners, engineers, landscape architects, or just good managers. First and foremost they need to be top quality people with breadth



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- 1 **St. Clement Danes and the Skyline of the City of London.** The new, the old; the genuine, the fake; the good, the bad; the high, the low; the bland, the intricate; and a maze of fairly narrow streets . . . all adding up to one of the richest urban textures imaginable and one that has grown over time and is still evolving.
- 2 **Reguliersbreesgraat, Amsterdam.** One of the most interesting, lively and attractive urban environments is that where all the components—buildings, roads, spaces, people, traffic, color, graphics, sound—have been successfully blended. The concern of urban design is firstly to get this mix to happen at all and secondly, to get the mix right.
- 3 **Trafalgar Square & Environs, London.** One of the most famous formal 'places' in the world, yet, with the exception of the National Gallery, and St. Martin's in the Fields, created by remarkably mediocre buildings and an appalling traffic circulation system.

of vision, imagination, and flair, and with the stamina and commitment to work—often over long time periods and against daunting odds—for the good of the city or town as a whole.

Frequently, urban designers need to work in teams and in this instance the right mix of committed professionals is essential. But often major achievement in urban design requires passionately devoted individuals such as a “Mr. Guildford,” a “Mr. Bath,” or a “Mr. Milton Keynes,” and famous people like Sixtus V, Michelangelo, Sir Christopher Wren, Peter the Great, Baron Haussmann, John Wood, James Oglethorpe, and John Nash.

As a general rule, it is rare to find all the necessary qualities in individual Renaissance men—though when these do emerge, they should be carefully looked after. More usually, collective, complementary thought and action are required.

### Why Does It Matter?

In my view, it is essential that urban design be properly recognized and promoted academically and professionally. It is particularly apparent in the United Kingdom that town planners have become too involved in systems and processes as ends in their own right. Architects have become obsessed with “going it alone” and breaking free from aesthetic and other

planning controls. Both groups are seriously at fault.

In reality people judge architecture and planning, landscape and engineering, by the *quality*—principally the physical quality—of what they see around them. They are concerned with the function and attractiveness of *places* as a whole and less with individual buildings, plans, and procedures, however well-conceived each of these may be in its own right.

Despair at the divisive attitudes adopted by architects and town planners in the United Kingdom led a small number of us to found the Urban Design Group five years ago and to try to fill the empty professional middle ground between these polarized factions. To our delight the response to the Group’s subsequent activities has shown considerable interest in matters identified with urban design among practitioners and academics in the United Kingdom.

### How Do You Do It?

I believe that there are several fundamental prerequisites for good urban design, of which perhaps the most important is getting the right team together. The team must then be able to ask the right questions. Whom is the scheme for? How and by whom will it be implemented? It must also be very clear who makes which decisions and it must define at the outset—and

hold to unwaveringly—three or four key aims and objectives. Finally, the team must avoid getting bogged down in the “process” of working; the ideas, the caring, and the stamina count.

Either individually, or, more likely, collectively, urban designers need to exhibit certain attributes.

They must be able to operate at a “top level” and must be a force to be reckoned with by politicians, administrators, industrialists, developers, and so on.

They must be passionately concerned with achievability, the relentless dedication to putting design ideas to practical effect that has characterized all really fine historic examples of city building.

They must look outward and show proper deference towards the other professions and to the community. In the practice of urban design, the richness of the mix of people from different backgrounds is important.

They must be able to argue strongly for the necessary resources of finance, land, and manpower to see through their ideas. Reports, colored plans, models, advocacy, and the ability to negotiate are only a means to an end, which is to achieve something worthwhile *on the ground*.

They must possess astute financial awareness, in particular of the mechanism of public finance and the profit motivation of private developers.

They must be idealistic, spotting those of like minds, and realistic, recognizing why things go wrong.

They must have an unfettered imagination and a commitment to quality and to finishing the job.

### What Are the Problems?

In the United Kingdom, urban design still has a long way to go. There is no handy succinct definition of urban design and very little contemporary academic tradition about it. Unlike several countries outside the United Kingdom, including the United States and Saudi Arabia, we do not have a professional Institute of Urban Design or any significant writers or publicists who are willing to promote themselves as urban designers rather than as architects or planners.

Moreover, while urban design is practiced for the benefit of the community at large, there is not always a readily identifiable “client” to pay for it. In the United Kingdom, urban design seems to be practiced either as the culmination of planning (usually by public authorities) or as a prelude to architecture (usually for

private or institutional clients). Thus, the “client” for urban design may be central or local government (politicians, elected councillors, civil servants, and/or professional officers), developers, industrialists, institutional funds, trusts, special interest groups, amenity societies, and so on.

Urban design projects often go wrong because of a lack of clear aims and objectives, long time periods, changes in political or economic climate, land acquisition difficulties, swings of public opinion, inflexibility, an overdeterministic approach, overcomplexity, and so on. We need to understand why this happens.

It has been suggested that urban design is a luxury at the present time. I do not agree. The world’s current state of economic recession does not diminish the need for *quality* and the need for *value for money*; in fact, it enhances these needs. Urban design is not necessarily concerned with lavish expenditure or grandiose redevelopment projects: it is equally concerned with small-scale, modest, sensitive, revitalization projects or encouragement to others to improve their surroundings.

### So What?

Urban design can be daunting and frustrating. Good results are much more likely to be achieved through collective patience, stamina,

mediation, and compromise rather than pigheaded, dictatorial, and arrogant individualism. Urban design involves a meeting of minds and the taking of small sensible incremental steps. Very rarely is it about great extravagant strides.

Urban designers are not “special people” who can break the rules. Nor should they hide behind a professional or academic smoke screen of esoteric ideas and jargon. They *do* need to be worldly, wise, opportunity-seeking, problem-solving, and profoundly interested in doing a good job as urban designers.

Lest anything I have said appears to diminish the role of the individual professional—whether architect, town planner, or other—let me hasten to say that this is in no way intended. We all need each other. May I, therefore, in conclusion, quote the distinguished American urban designer, Jaquelin Robertson, with whom I had the pleasure to work a few years ago and who remains a good friend and professional colleague:

Historically, there have been Nashes (facilitators), and Soanes (individualists). Soane was unquestionably the finer architect, but Nash was of much greater significance to a much larger public. His canvas was greater and thus his beneficial

influence affected a greater number of people. In the end he teaches us “more about more.” More architects, I believe, will find professional satisfaction in trying to effect change at some larger scale. I do not mean that thinking about and making buildings like Swiss watches won’t be important—just not *the* only important thing intellectually.