

UC Berkeley

Places

Title

American Planning Association Urban Design/Preservation Division: Is Urban Design on the Right Track? [Forum]

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/64f7j1jq>

Journal

Places, 15(1)

ISSN

0731-0455

Authors

Banerjee, Tridib
Bressi, Todd W
Enquist, Philip
[et al.](#)

Publication Date

2002-10-01

Peer reviewed

Tridib Banerjee,
Todd W. Bressi, Philip
Enquist, John Rahaim

Is Urban Design on the Right Track?

American Planning
Association Urban Design/
Preservation Division

Todd W. Bressi: In the last decade, there seems to have been a growing interest in urban design and physical planning. Cities themselves, and urban ways of living, have seen a remarkable resurgence as well.

University programs are proliferating (although some are struggling for enrollment) as are general courses in urbanism. Firms and practitioners are adding urban design to their portfolios; cities, developers, civic groups are generating dialogues of all sorts, charrettes, workshops, civic forums. Even the Congress for the New Urbanism is approaching its tenth anniversary as an organization.

It's an opportune moment, then, to ask, "Is Urban Design on the Right Track?"

I would like to preface this discussion with remarks related to the conference "Urban Design Now," which was held last April in New York and sponsored by Harvard, Columbia and the Van Alen Institute. The conference focused primarily on what urban design is, but also reflected on where urban design has come from, and that might give us a better context for this discussion.

The field of urban design is generally dated back to a seminal conference at Harvard in 1956, at which Harvard's dean at the time, Josep Lluís Sert, set forth the propositions that would underlie it. According to an article in the conference publication by Margaret Crawford and Andrea Kahn, two things set urban design apart from other types of environmental design practice at the time.

First, Sert thought that urban design would be an alternative arena for architects, planners and landscape designers to work together in a common concern for the physical form of the city—a vehicle for overcoming fragmentation among disciplines.

Second, he thought urban design

would be a mode of practice for people who were committed to the idea of the city and the culture of the city. So urban design was fundamentally linked to the idea of urbanism, as well.

Crawford and Kahn note that a number of changes have occurred in the profession over the past few decades, and that it faces new challenges. For example, they say, by the 1980s, the modernist inclination of most urban designers, which was laid out in the discussions at Harvard and subsequent conferences, yielded to what they call a "post-modern contextualism," which has evolved into ideas like New Urbanism and neotraditionalism.

They note that the urban development process has been characterized by an increasing number of, and increasingly complex, public-private partnerships, challenging notions of civic responsibility and public access to urban space.

They note the increasing importance of aesthetics in city development, and question whether the focus on the visual character of cities is a "dangerous concealment of social realities."

And they note that the nation has become increasingly suburban, and wonder whether urban design, with a commitment to cities, is losing its relevance. Or, conversely, I might ask, are urban designers prepared to engage the scale, the systems and the kinds of lifestyles that characterize the suburban landscape?

I would suggest an additional set of concerns of my own. Is urban design, as practiced and studied, founded on a strong enough research or knowledge basis? Is it overly directed towards formal strategies without strong approaches for understanding local conditions? Has there been enough evaluation of recent



These forum pages are produced under an agreement between *Places/Design History Foundation* and the American Planning Association, Urban Design and Preservation Division. This article reports on a session at the last national APA Conference, held April 14-17 in Chicago. The chair of APA's Urban Design and Preservation Division is Karen Hundt. For more information about APA membership, upcoming programs and resources, visit www.planning.org.

urban design strategies—do we know enough about what we’ve been doing to be doing it well?

Let me start the discussion by revisiting one of Sert’s propositions. From your different vantages, has urban design been successful at being an integrative force among the different design disciplines, architecture, planning and landscape architecture?

John Rahaim: I would argue that for the most part urban design has not been successful in this regard. And I think that is largely because we have not been able to define urban design in a way that the public, that elected officials can really understand. So we have not been the force in city building that we otherwise could be. That’s something the New Urbanists have been successful at, packaging and marketing what they do.

Tridib Banerjee: From the academic perspective, I might begin by noting that this year something like seventeen different planning programs are recruiting for positions in urban design or related fields, which is probably the one concentration with the highest number of positions available this year.

The question is whether urban design has been sufficiently institutionalized in public sector planning. My sense is that it has been to some extent, it is part of most planning organizations, but I don’t think it has come to have the central role that our predecessor had expected.

My sense is that the time of the grand visionary urban design plan is over, that we are talking about “make no big plans.” Urban design, like planning generally, has become much more democratized, much more pluralistic, and in that sense it has served an integrative function across the class ranges and neighborhood differences. We are seeing more smaller-scale urban design efforts, a lot of urban

design initiatives that are coming from the private sector, sometimes neighborhood groups are pushing for urban design improvements in the context of community development. With infrastructure development, ISTEA money and so forth, there is a lot going on.

So we are seeing more of a “thousand points of light approach” to urban design than one single grand visionary approach and the central synthetic role that they thought of in those days.

Bressi: Phil, do you have experience, in the consulting you’ve done, with municipalities that have set themselves up to be good clients for urban design?

Enquist: I’m seeing some clients that are as sophisticated as we are in terms of interest and knowledge of urban design. In Chicago, Mayor Richard Daley is fascinated by urban design and the quality of the public realm, and has challenged his departments of the environment, planning and transportation to look at things from an urban design perspective. The goal is for Chicago to be America’s greenest city, and that is influencing all sorts of improvements within the public realm. In Milwaukee, we’re working with John Norquist, another mayor who has really understood the importance of urban design and the commitment to the public realm and is bringing interesting changes to the city.

I’ve also had experiences in a few suburban communities that have taken the initiative to get all their departments together around the table, the transportation department, the civil engineering groups, the planning groups, to talk about these issues together, and take the walls down between their different disciplines.

Bressi: Tridib, what is happening in planning programs that are expanding into urban design with coursework or

faculty? Are they finding ways to forge good alliances with architecture and landscape architecture programs, or is there suspicion?

Banerjee: Obviously, Harvard has a long tradition of having all the disciplines under one roof, and they seem to have worked things out, and the University of California, Berkeley, has similar relationships, but I haven’t seen at the academic level in general any great sort of integrative effort in the curriculum.

I’ve noticed that many of the new positions are being advertised in schools that are not traditionally linked to architecture, like geography and public policy. The faculty there are not inherently sensitive or sympathetic to urban design, but they are advertising for these positions because they feel there is a demand, that students are interested. Whether the absence of a connection with architecture would hurt them, I don’t know, though I would guess that they are probably better off in that they don’t have to fight the territorial battles that often arise in places with a stronger connection to architecture.

Typically there are two or three models for planning schools. One is the traditional model where it shares the same roof with the school of architecture. That does not necessarily suggest a friendly relationship between architecture and planning. In recent years, planning schools have begun to look at urban design from a larger perspective, from the view of the city as a whole, and policies and implementation and institutional issues.

Bressi: Is academic fragmentation is harder to address than municipal or political fragmentation?

Enquist: That issue doesn’t just apply to universities, it’s all over, including in my own office, where I have architects who refuse to work with

the urban design and planning studios because they think it's beneath them somehow.

Banerjee: One of the reasons we have difficulty with interdisciplinary work in the university is the tenure and promotion process, which basically determines faculty members' lives and careers, and are based on their commitment and basis in a particular discipline. Very few urban design programs have faculty of their own; as an academic discipline, urban design doesn't have a real identity. So you have a foot in architecture, planning or landscape architecture or some combination. But universities are very much aware of this and are trying to create interdisciplinary initiatives.

Bressi: Let's talk about Sert's notion that urban design is a field whose practitioners have a fundamental commitment to cities and urbanism. Does urban design offer the right paradigms? Does it have the right knowledge base, the right research tools for dealing with the wide range of development patterns that one finds in metropolitan regions?

Enquist: Suburbs are a fascinating topic now; there are very interesting things happening. Suburbs in America in general didn't have the benefit of our predecessors' interest in infrastructure, so the road system is generally all they have and often that's not enough. There are too few roads, and they are too wide, generally, and many are not even connected effectively.

In Chicago, we are now seeing suburbs trying to get rail stations. Schaumburg wants an extension of the Blue Line so it can connect to O'Hare Airport by rail. Prairie Crossing at Greys Lake is trying to add two rail stations, on a Wisconsin Central and a Metro Line, so that they can connect to Chicago and O'Hare. They see this as valuable to their communities.

There's also an interest in mixed-

use development, housing over garages, having "granny flats" if you will in single-family neighborhoods. We've just been involved in a project in Highland Park here, just about twenty miles outside of Chicago, it's mixed use with rental housing, retail, office, being built within walking distance to a train station.

Rahaim: In Seattle, many suburban communities are becoming more vocal about creating places out of their communities, and they are doing this in an after-the-fact kind of way. The city of Bellevue, which is a pretty high-density suburb, consciously made a decision to turn what was a suburban office center into an urban, mixed-use environment, and is doing this over a twenty-five-year period.

Part of the reason for this is the state has sent a message to every community: density is not a question of whether you are going to have it, everyone is going to have to accept more density. Once you get beyond that argument, the question is how do you become more dense, and that has enabled this discussion about placemaking.

I think in terms of research, it would be useful to understand how one can go about doing this. It would be helpful to develop case studies of how cities can start creating places out of what were traditional suburban placeless communities.

Banerjee: I don't think the suburban arena is different from the arena of urban design. I have always considered Clarence Perry, who designed the neighborhood unit concept, which pretty much dictated the design of most early suburbs, very much an urban designer.

The real issue is sprawl versus the compact city. How to re-morph sprawl into more compact urban form is a real challenge for urban designers. It's not just a matter of design, there

are a lot of problems of politics and other kinds of institutional and structural difficulties.

For example, zoning plays a powerful role in preserving the landscape and built form. There is a good reason for that, because one thing zoning does is to protect the secondary mortgage market. When people are buying homes, they are not only choosing a place to live, they are also making an investment. They are not only financing a home, but also their children's college tuition and things like that. Yet it is the single-family home that continues to be the bane of urban designers and the real problem of sprawl and the compact city.

As urban designers we have not historically paid much attention to the larger political-economic problem of urban form. We can always make small-scale changes, what designers call placemaking, but fundamentally, the restructuring of the American metropolis from low-density sprawl to more dense urban form remains a daunting challenge.

Bressi: John, even though you come from Seattle, much of the city is built to single-family density, so you are capturing one end of the suburban scale. Seattle has had a lot of experience with trying to do infill and densification in neighborhood centers, but has faced a lot of resistance—

Rahaim: That's definitely true. Even though we are experiencing substantial increases in density, seventy percent of the city is zoned for single-family residential, and that is unlikely to change, so the vast majority of the growth in this city is actually happening on less than thirty percent of the land area in the city, which is an interesting discussion in and of itself.

In talking about tools, most cities have essentially done urban design through regulation, good or bad. I think some of the tools are in need of

serious updating. For example, generally the standard for commercial streets and downtown streets in Seattle is that buildings are built to the property line and retail is required for the majority of the frontage. That seems like a great idea: you put retail along the edges of the street, you activate the streets, and so on. The problem is that that creates an amount of retail that is beyond the capacity of the market to absorb. We really have to think more carefully, and in a more nuanced way, about how to create active streets.

Banerjee: In planning we can approach urban design from a larger public policy perspective, so we can think about other measures that affect people's choices and preferences. For example, a major problem for the American metropolis is that we have uneven standards for schools, and as long as there is a significant difference in the quality of school districts, you will see this fragmentation. Unless we can address those issues in urban design, just tinkering with the built form itself is not going to change the fundamental, structural reason why we have sprawl and not compact living.

Bressi: As I said earlier, the Congress for the New Urbanism will soon be celebrating its tenth year as a formal organization. What has New Urbanism accomplished? Is New Urbanism on the right track?

Rahaim: One thing New Urbanists have done is to create a cachet around their movement, and frankly they've done a much better job than those of us who have practiced urban design for many years. One reason for this is that most of their work is focussed on single developments built by single developers, so you can wrap a product with a single marketing package.

Enquist: The charter is a very impressive document, and I reference

it quite a bit. What the New Urbanists have done is to sound a wake-up call to the design profession, that it was neglecting the suburban environment. You have relegated the design of suburbs to traffic engineers and residential developers. Where is the designer in suburban development?

Rahaim: I also think CNU has helped advance the discussion about design and urbanism, particularly about pedestrian-oriented, mixed-use development. They have raised some awareness about the need to think differently about development patterns, about some mixed-use. But one could argue about how successful New Urbanist projects have been in that regard.

Banerjee: I'm not sure their solutions are necessarily that versatile. I mean, once you have seen one, it seems like you have seen them all. There is a repetition. The concepts are somewhat limited, yet they are applied to all of the opportunities and possibilities. New Urbanist projects also seem to be oriented to upper-class, upper middle-class neighborhoods, rather than poorer areas. And is quite a little bit of physical determinism in their arguments, the belief that you can shape people's lives and behaviors by how you design the environment.

Enquist: I think traditional urban designers would simply like to see more depth in coverage, and not just focus on new communities, and I think New Urbanists are aggressively trying to do that. They are focusing more on second and third generations of land use, redevelopment issues, brownfields issues, and now you're starting to see larger, regional issues being addressed.

Banerjee: What the New Urbanists have done, if nothing else, is to inject an enormous amount of passion and mobilize a lot of support not only among professionals but also among

lay people. They have touched a hidden source of energy in the public at large.

Enquist: They should be commended for permeating their message down, basically, to a lay audience. They have had a great reach through their movement.

Banerjee: New Urbanism has made a lot of people angry, so we now have a lively discussion going on, and that's a very good contribution. The movement is something that was needed and they made a very timely contribution.

Todd W. Bressi is executive editor of Places and a lecturer in urban design and planning at the University of Pennsylvania.

John Rabaim is executive director of the Seattle Design Commission and CityDesign.

Philip Enquist is partner-in-charge of urban design and planning at Skidmore Owings & Merrill in Chicago.

Tridib Banerjee is a professor of urban and regional planning at the University of Southern California.