Urban Design—
Who Needs It?

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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, 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 frst, 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 institutional-
ized 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 the various roles that are not
yet universally understood
and to many people conjure
up images of Czolgosz’s
"cobblescape" and Bolsward:
The coming together of
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 "loss 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, urban
planning, and town planning,
drawing on the design tradition of
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 in 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.
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 blind, 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. Reguliersbreestraat, 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 rights outs of committed professionals is essential. But often major achievements in urban design require passionately devoted individuals such as a “Mr. Guildford,” a “Mr. Bath,” or a “Mr. Milton Keynes,” and famous people like Saxton V. Michelanglo, Sir Christopher Wren, Peter the Great, Baron Hausmanns, 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, complimentary 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 achievable, the relentless dedication to purging 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 acute financial awareness; in particular of the mechanism of public finance and the profit motivation of private developers. They must be idealistic, sparing those of like minds, and realistic, recognizing why things go wrong.

They must have an unlettered 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 councilors, 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 lavishly 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.