

Urban Design in the New City

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THE CONTEXT FOR URBAN DESIGN

As we approach the beginning of a new century and millennium, the field of urban design seems to be in the grip of increasing confusion and despair, which goes beyond the *fin de siècle* hesitation and uncertainty one could observe a hundred years ago. There are compelling reasons, which make us pause and reflect, and it is particularly the students, who are bombarded with information on the newest and ever changing conditions, giving them at best a basis for analysis and criticism rather than a solid foundation from which they can confidently operate and undertake the design of our rapidly changing environment.

One reason for the uncertainty is, unfortunately, the field of theory itself. Based on postmodern and poststructuralist doctrines, there can be no certainty. Quality can not be objectively assessed; rather it is depending on the observers and their viewpoint. The future is unknown and the "only certainty is change and impermanence," (but maybe even that cannot be certain). The immersion into work of Derrida, Beaudrillard, Foucault (to be found on many reading lists of architectural theory classes) is a requisite as a philosophical base for the understanding of our times. Yet in themselves, the philosophical positions so far have done little to advance the theory and practice of urban design. The reliance on late twentieth century philosophers has proven to be unsuccessful in producing new urban design paradigms in dealing with the urban environment.

On the other hand, there is a plethora of theories and positions on the emerging city and urban environment. Melvin Webber's *The Urban Place and Nonplace Urban Realm*, 1967, presaged a new urban pattern based on information and communication. This concept was extended by Manuel Castells in the *Informational City*, 1989, followed by William Mitchell's *City of Bits*, 1995, gradually replacing transportation and direct interaction by communication and ultimately virtual reality. This development challenges the very essence of the city, which, as we know it, is characterized by its abundance of interactions, dependencies and density of events. The recent developments of the city itself are aptly described in Joel Garreau's *Edge City*, 1991, or Edward Soja's *Postmodern Geographies*, 1989. Many of these texts yield valuable insights based on empiric observations, but by and large they provide descriptive models with scarce attempts for causal analysis. Often these descriptions strive for academic thoroughness, rigor and objectivity. Or, in contrast, they take a critical stance resulting in provocative challenges and polemics. The academic environment thrives on this type of discourse and intellectual altercation, yet the results are usually diffuse, expansive and diverging, hardly the condition to give productive parameters for the design or design process.

There are few newer urban design theories, which could expand

on the legacy of Kevin Lynch, Ed Bacon, Jonathan Barnett, leading from a thorough understanding of the contemporary city and its culture to proposals of models and strategies for intervention and design.

New conditions or new sensitivities bring new challenges. We haven't yet integrated the car in our cities when we are faced with the new forces of the information and communication age. Dealing with sustainability by now is an imperative, and maybe soon we will seriously consider the social and economic conditions of globalization on our cities.

STRATEGIES

How can we develop strategies to counter the diffuse and diverging conditions, how can we integrate late contemporary philosophies, how can we deal with the fragmentation of thought and the specialization of issues and concerns? Despite the newness, despite the rapid and radical change, despite the expansion of the field, despite the uncertainty it is imperative to go back to basics, back to our field, which is *designing for a better city*.

We must understand the object of our inquiry, the city and urban environment. City studies need to result in strong concepts of the contemporary city, dealing with causal relationships, particularly social and economic preferences and the influence of transportation and communication on building types, patterns, structure and form. The design of the whole is no longer possible, which means we have to develop new design approaches and identify intervention possibilities to reach the design objectives. Is there truth and certainty in our concepts? Surely not. Yet we have to strive for better information, better techniques, better objectives and criteria to prevail and compete with others, who do not hesitate to act.

"You cannot not know history", Philip Johnson remarked. History is replete with precedents, failures and successes, and a thorough grounding in the history and the evolution of ideas is paramount. City growth and size was overwhelming to ancient Rome, to early industrial cities and to the modern city at the beginning of this century with concerns for overcrowding, urban hygiene and quality of life. Many of the conditions persist in the contemporary city based on consumption and transportation. In each period we find positive examples of urban design as an expression of the given culture.

The history of philosophy reveals an abundance of recurring thoughts and conditions to show us, how to deal with some of the operational dilemmas and debilitating consequences of skepticism, relativism or nihilism.

As individual designers we need to adopt a normative stand. It is a big environment out there. Somebody must strive to design it better. In our postmodern world, uncertainty, relativity and indeter-

minacy are accepted conditions. As designers, we try to develop strategies and approaches which account for these conditions, a new and interesting but difficult endeavor (design for processes, force fields, zones, catalysts, liquid space). Despite possible breakthroughs along these lines, the designs still may require positive, finite physical action and decision. The increasing gap and discrepancy between avant-garde thought in academia and built reality in architecture and urban design indicates the need for more confidence, assertiveness and activism by well trained designers.

For the student or young practitioner, the development of a coherent stance with a decisive yet evolving notion of the city and urban environment is indicated. This shall be paired with the development of a method or capability for design intervention and contribution.

Five Urban Design Postulates

As a consequence of the analysis of today's context, the emerging urban environment and the role of urban design, several positions on urban design are emerging:

1. Urban Design must contribute at all urban scales

Yes, this includes specifically the city and regional scale. Cities are no longer finite, nicely bounded entities, they are ever increasing systems of regional scale and complexity. Unfortunately, the urban and regional planners have in many cases abdicated their responsibility of designing and planning the city or region with whatever means available. (Certainly in the United States there is a frightening lack of regional planning, and city planning has, with few exceptions, devolved to abstract policy analysis and outdated bureaucratic management and control). Ultimately, it does not matter which type of professionals design the urban environment, as long as they work beyond their specialization towards providing a quality environment. (Transportation planners and surveyors are probably still the most influential shapers of our contemporary cities.) What matters is the need for design and better solutions at all scales. Someone has to be trained and accept the design challenge.

At the largest scale the emerging city nets in Japan, Holland, Germany, France, based on high speed mass transportation, are promising examples for regional planning and design. Euralille is more significant in its concept as a center for a super region than as an architectural project.

The lack of design and planning for the growth of large metropolitan areas is an increasing problem worldwide, leading to deprived and banal urban environments as a result of rampant development. Los Angeles in the next 18 years is projected to add 50 % growth. This constitutes 6 Million inhabitants or a city of two times the size of Chicago. At this time there is no planning or design nor even a public consciousness concerning the potential implications of such growth.

2. The diffuse city scape requires creation of a diversity of urban places with unique identity

The contemporary urban environment is characterized by uncontrolled suburban growth and undifferentiated sprawl. Decisive form determinants are accessibility and transportation, consumer preference for the one family house and economic formula for commercial building types. In combination, these forces produce appalling patterns of mindless repetition, uniformity and banality in an unprecedented international suburban style. The emerging influence of communication will reinforce this pattern of entropy with its diffusion and lack of articulation. The trend is clearly a most depressing doomsday scenario.

However, the increasing ease of transportation and communication will not only lead to dispersal and diffusion (mainly by the residential population with their support functions), it will also allow for voluntary clustering and local articulation and concentration

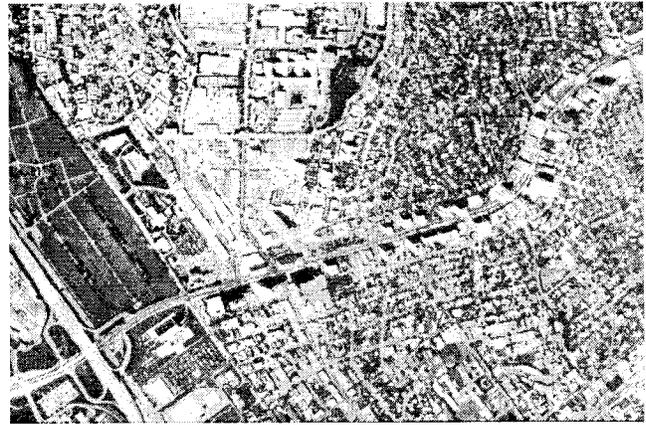


Fig. 1. Urban patterns in Los Angeles.



Fig. 2. Attempt to provide urban identity, City Walk, Hollywood.

(mainly by center functions) (remember von Thunen's locational theories). Catalysts can trigger the creation and articulation of local clusters and with increasing freedom of choice, a compelling argument can be made for the increasing importance of quality and design. Yet, we have to see whether this freedom will be used to produce frivolous theme parks and garish commercial vernacular or whether it can create a least a reasonable number of alternatives of contemporary architectural experiments. So far, the combination of shopping and entertainment has been a successful formula to create an urban identity and attraction.



Fig. 3. Fremont Street, Las Vegas: A catalyst for an urban place.



Fig. 4. Articulation of urban grid in Los Angeles.

3. Insert Urban Design into existing Pattern

The uniformity and lack of character of the urban environment will be counteracted by the creation of unique centers and places. Yet beyond this pattern of foci in a sea of undifferentiated banality, there is opportunity for the insertion of urban design elements in form of links, edges, accentuations, enhancements of natural and man made elements, landscape, well designed infrastructure. The upgrading of an urban street (Fremont Street, Las Vegas, Architect Jerde Partnership) by a vaulted space frame, provided instant recognition and identity. It resulted in a reversal of urban blight and acted as a catalyst for the re-creation of an urban center and economic strengthening of the adjacent area.

4. Design the city as a living organism of growth, change and adaptation

The suburban environments, sometimes even entire cities are growing over a short time with extremely limited range of land uses. They lack the richness and diversity of older cities with their higher densities and age old layering of different uses, patterns and styles. It is paradox that in the new single use areas, the planning tools are often used to protect and preserve the singularity and monotony, rather than allowing change, adaptation, upgrading and revitalization.

The evolution of the urban grid shows both problems and

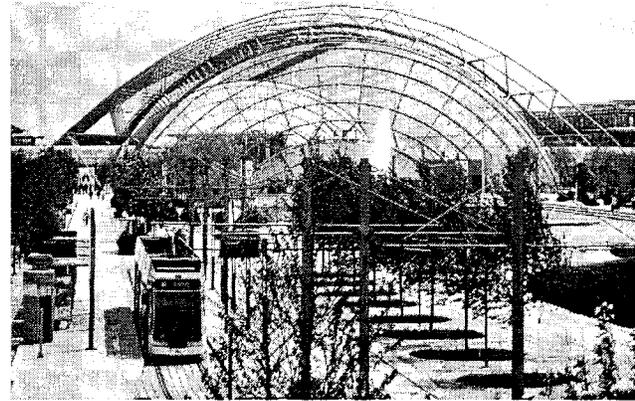


Fig. 5. Messehalle Leipzig (Arch.: von Gerkan, Marg + Partner).

opportunities of the dynamic changes of land uses, densities and building types. There are similar developments along the European country roads, as they lead from the city to the country side or interconnect smaller cities, creating continuous belts of development. The superimposition of new infrastructure (freeways, mass transit, stations, public facilities) certainly induce change in the affected areas, but unfortunately this change is downplayed or ignored by timid or ill-informed public leaders. Thus the potential for change and new vitality can not be realized to the fullest.

As an example of revitalization and densification, the City of Los Angeles, as part of its Master Plan, has adopted a concept of rejuvenating the urban corridors along its major arteries, creating a grid of higher density and complexity (at 1/2 or 1 mile intervals), and complementing the existing low density pattern.

5. Create new urban prototypes and patterns

Unfortunately, there is little innovation in the development of new building types or urban patterns. The freestanding one-family house remains the preferred and idealized model in most urban contexts. This is the case despite the changing family structure, the increasing affordability gap and the increasing scarcity of land with its associated increase in land costs. Yet, despite the acceptance of a continued large proportion of single family housing, there is a need for the creation of alternatives to accommodate different household configurations, to create different land use patterns, to pursue principles of ecology and sustainability, to accommodate contemporary lifestyles, to provide flexibility and adaptability, to employ new production techniques. Urbanistically, the building, whether residential or commercial, can transcend the box, become a wall an edge, an axis, a backbone and organizer, a catalyst, a determinant in a force field. New combinations of uses may create new types, such as the transit station as center, the school as place for community interaction, the telecommunication center in the housing complex, the fair ground or convention center as an urban place. Wide span buildings and supersheds open new opportunities.

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