

The goals of landscape architects were seen as peripheral and over time were even accused of facilitating decentralizing tendencies and suburbanization. Urban design, many believed, had to concern itself primarily with the tougher mandates of Modern architecture and its transformative urban manifestos, not with the softer art of designing with natural things or fostering kindness to ecosystems.⁴

An emerging generation of designers calling themselves landscape urbanists questions the supposition that urban design insight is the prerogative of architectural form-making sensibilities alone and asks, “Isn’t the landscape the real glue of the modern metropolis?” This startling proposition becomes less revolutionary the moment one tours virtually any contemporary metropolitan area from the air to observe the small proportion of building as compared to landscape. We are no longer building the solid city represented in figure-ground plans in which open space is what is left where there are no buildings, or what is shaped by surrounding built form. While still somewhat vague in methodology and projects, the promise of landscape urbanism is powerful, since it promotes a logical integration of land use, environmental stewardship, and place making.

The increasing intellectual claims on urban design from urban planning and especially from landscape architecture present the most fascinating recent developments for the field. Given the complexities of urbanization, the placing of urban design concerns closer to the center of each of the design disciplines is promising and in a belated way fulfills the instincts (if not the actions) of the urban design pioneers of a half century ago. Conversely, the increased attention to matters of urban design has forced the field to become alert to more aspects of the social and natural sciences, to transportation and civil engineering, water and waste management, zoning and public policy, and other areas earlier considered largely the responsibility of others.

Champions of Time-Honored Places and Principles or Agents of Modernization?

As you sit near the Piazzetta in Venice, clarity of mind about the present state of cities or their future may wither. Determined to deny the clarions of sentimentality, you think “What is it precisely about contemporary urbanity that seems so much less satisfying than the urbanity here?” Is it bigness, not of the entire city but of its individual