

in business, technology, and commerce engenders a romanticized view of old places and ways of living.

Thus, urban designers can find themselves trapped between two societal expectations: be guardians of what is best about traditional urbanism, yet also help orchestrate our urban futures by creatively responding to contemporary conditions.

Conveying Expertise in an Era of Decentralized Decision Making

Urban design is seldom an individual's art or a stage for soloists, and project authorship is fundamentally unimportant. The most important clients for urban design services are not always the most visible or the ones paying the bills. Remaining unaware of or unsympathetic to such conditions is not uncommon among those who come at urban design from too narrow a designer's perspective. Certainly insight and imaginative response to urban problems are needed and prized, but confusing these with unilateral orchestration of a design vision does not often help advance an urban design idea; indeed, it often leads to frustration. Some of the skepticism about the value or possibility of urban design comes from those for whom compromise is difficult.

Pursuing any development or neighborhood plan today involves working with a myriad of actors beyond professional collaborators during planning and design phases. These include direct abutters, surrounding neighbors, elected officials, public agencies, opponents (often), investors, financial institutions, and regulators, all billed as "stakeholders." Navigating the shoals created by cadres of stakeholders is perhaps the greatest challenge to pursuing sophisticated ideas about and goals for urbanism. Consensus around goals that are not very ambitious is, unfortunately, common. However, rather than wallow in despair about the unpredictable nature of decentralized processes, urban designers must learn to be more effective collaborators, willing participants in true interdisciplinary endeavors, and advocates for ideas not always their own, ideas that have the potential to rally others around higher expectations, not expedient solutions. Such skills are not always available in a designer's tool kit. Some blame the messiness of democratized processes for producing mediocrity. On the other hand, many can offer examples of substantial benefits to projects as a result of broader community participation.⁵