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The products of architecture and the nature of urban design

Most urban design projects are architect led if not initiated. Many architects claim expertise in urban design the day they are graduated with a degree. Their image of urban design varies. Although architects have often been part of the anti-urban intellectual elite (White and White, 1964) a number of prominent practitioners and educators have been vitally interested in cities and city life. Others, while strongly socially aware find that being involved seriously in urban design, as it is described in Part 1 of this book, is just too frustrating. They thus prefer to stick to the design of individual buildings and, sometimes, building complexes. Yet others want cities to be works of art. Few cities are, except in the cumulative sense of being a collage of buildings and open spaces (Rowe and Koetter, 1978).

The Products of Architecture: Buildings

Architects design buildings for individual clients. The buildings serve many purposes but, possibly, the primary purpose is to create a return on capital monies. Property developers have learnt that having a famous architect design their buildings enhances their investment. The public interest is not of concern to them or their architects unless it enhances profitability or if it is encoded in building regulations. A building affords and shelters specific activities but it is also a display of an architect's talents and the best way of displaying a building is as an object in space to be admired.

The borderline between large, multi-building architectural schemes and urban design is often fuzzy. I suspect the designers of Rockefeller Center saw the complex as an architectural project. If the term 'urban design' had, however, been coined in the 1930s, perhaps they would have regarded it as an urban design scheme. Rockefeller Center has been classified as a total urban design in this book (see Chapter 7) but its architects may have seen it as an all-of-a-piece urban design. They may not have liked to have been seen as one team of associated architects rather than a set of creative individuals each producing a building of note. Much the same can be said about the Lincoln Center (see Figure 7.7).

When urban design is considered to be a high architectural art the concern in design is often reduced to how to express in geometrical forms and materials a