

The End(s) of Urban Design

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Urban design has reached a dead end. Estranged both from substantial and from the living reality of the exponential and transformative growth of the world's cities, it finds itself pinioned between nostalgia and inevitabilism, increasingly unable to inventively confront the morphological, functional, and human needs of cities and citizens. While the task grows in urgency and complexity, the disciplinary mainstreaming of urban design has transformed it from a potentially broad and hopeful conceptual category into an increasingly rigid, restrictive, and boring set of orthodoxies.

In many ways, the enterprise was misbegotten from the get-go. The much marked conference at Harvard's Graduate School of Design (GSD) in April 1956 both is a useful origin point for the discipline and reveals the embedded conflicts and contradictions that have brought urban design to its current state of intellectual and imaginative inertia. For José Luis Sert—dean of the GSD, convener of the gathering, and president of CIAM (Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne) since 1947—the conference was surely part of a last gasp at recuperating the increasingly schismatic CIAM project, which finally collapsed at the CIAM 10 meeting in Dubrovnik the following year, largely because of the growing dissent of the younger Team 10 group, one of whose mainstays, Aldo van Eyck, had grouched that since CIAM 8 in 1951 the organization had been “virtually ‘governed’ from Harvard.”