

on Urban Design, which soon morphed into the Urban Design Group (UDG), inserted as a special, semiautonomous branch within the City Planning Department and intended to make an end run around its lumbering bureaucracy. The Planning Department was itself then in the throes of producing a new master plan for the city, the last such to be attempted. Despite the inherent dangers of giant, single-sourced plans, this ongoing willed incapacity to think comprehensively now haunts the city with a counterproductive imaginative boundary, a suspicion of big plans that refuses, however provisionally, to sum up its parts.

The department's plan—ambitious, outdated, and strangely reticent about formal specifics—was ignominiously turned down by the City Council in 1969, victim both of its own unpersuasive vision and of a then-boiling suspicion of master planning in general. Urban design represented a clear alternative to the overweening command style of such big, infrastructure-fixated, one-size-fits-all, urban-renewal-tainted plans. Reflecting the reborn interest in neighborhood character and the relevance of historic urban forms, the UDG's main m.o. was to designate special districts, each subject to customized regulatory controls intended to preserve and enhance (and sometimes invent) their singular character. This districting—and its zoning and coding strategies—was later extended politically by the devolution of a degree of planning authority to local community boards, part of a larger wave of administrative decentralization that included, catastrophically, the school system. The move to neighborhood planning, however, has proved a generally positive development, if seriously undercut in practice by the restricted budgets and limited statutory authority of the boards themselves and by a continuing failure to balance local initiative with a more comprehensive vision.

The work of the UDG was very much the product of its time, weighted toward the reestablishment of traditional streetscapes threatened by Modernist zoning formulations and visual sensibilities; the group's recommendations were an amalgam of prescribed setbacks, materials, arcades, signage, view corridors, and other formal devices for consolidating visual character. These prescriptions defined, at a stroke, the formal repertoire of American urban design and fixed its more limited social agenda on supporting the centrality of the street (whose life was the focus of Jacobs's urbanism) and efforts to reinforce the "character" of local identities in areas like the Theater District, the Financial District, and Lincoln Center, where it sought