

come to bad ends. The theoretical underpinnings of urban design seek to deflect—and correct—this problem by claiming to find principles situationally, via the sympathetic understanding and extension of styles and habits already indigenous to the sites of its operations. The imputation is not simply that urban design is respectful in some general sense but that its formal preferences—because they are “traditional”—embody consent.

In staking this claim, urban design operates as a kind of prospective preservationism. As a result, it becomes radically anticontextual by assuming that the meaning of space, once produced, is fixed, that an arcade is an arcade is an arcade is an arcade. By extension, it remains an item of faith for urban design that—however far removed from its originating contexts of meaning—an architectural object retains the power to re-create the values and relationships that first gave it form. This is a remarkably utopian position in the very worst way. Urban design’s project to reconfigure America’s towns and cities along largely imaginary eighteenth- and nineteenth-century lines, enabled and buttressed by rigorously restrictive codes, is chilling not simply for its blinkered and fantasmatic sense of history but also for its reductive and oppressive universalism and staggering degree of constraint.

But what exactly—beyond its stylistic peccadilloes—does urban design presume to preserve, and how does it know it when it sees it? In the already existing city, the recognition of living social systems and accumulated compacts about the value of place are necessary points of departure for any intervention. The formal medium for generalizing from such situations is the identification and analysis of pattern, the translation of some specific observation about the experience of people in space into a broader assertion about the desirable. This mode of inquiry—whether practiced by Aristotle, Baudelaire, Walter Benjamin, William H. Whyte, or Christopher Alexander—mediates between the limits and capacities of the body, a rich sense of individual psychology, and a set of assumptions about the social and cultural relations immanent to a specific place and time. Each of these is susceptible to great variation, and as a result, any pattern produced by their conjunction will inevitably shift, however slowly.

Architecture can respond to the dynamism of social patterns by closely accommodating well-observed particulars, by creating spaces of usefully loose fit, or by proposing arrangements that attempt to conduce or facilitate specific behaviors outside the conventions of the