

Bad Parenting

Emily Talen

It is time to wrestle urban design away from the bad parenting of architects. Instead of embracing its emerging social utility, they seem intent on casting it as their shameful problem child. Michael Sorkin's hyperbolic and pained assessment in "The End(s) of Urban Design" (previous chapter, this volume) is the familiar architect's rant. Urban designers' accomplishments are trivial, their idealism is absurd, and their orderliness is enough to make architects retch. Lessons like Paul Goldberger's "the absence of something wrong is what's totally wrong" (see "Urban Design Now: A Discussion," this volume) show a certain contempt for the field.

Sorkin is annoyed with urban design because, naturally, he is thinking like an architect. Architects crave originality—a cliché, but a true one. Transfer this to the design of human settlements and you get frustration: success in urban design is often about unoriginal things. And when architects look to urban design as the outlet for their creative genius, it tends to make them desperate, even hostile. Witness Sorkin's call for an urban design of "creative disruption."

Architects like Sorkin clearly recognize the importance of connecting urban design to social objectives, but they are uncomfortable with how that connection is usually created. Funny that he heralds Lewis Mumford as someone who understood the endless possibilities of relating justice