

2

Ambiguities of urban design

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Despite its frequent appearance in educational and professional literature, urban design is still an ambiguous term, used differently by different groups in different circumstances. Yet the growing attention to the subject and the rising number of academics and professionals who are engaged in urban design have brought to the surface a pressing need for a clearer definition. In this paper I will start by analysing those aspects of urban design which have caused such ambiguity and then look for a definition that addresses these uncertainties.

Urban design is a far from clear area of activity. Signs of the need for a clear definition of urban design can be seen in a variety of sources. The adequacy of the existing definitions is still in doubt, as evident in a recent conference on research and teaching in urban design (Billingham, 1995). This indicates why the search to find a satisfactory definition of urban design continues (Kindsvatner and von Grossmann, 1994; Rowley, 1994; Department of the Environment, 1995). A brief look at this search, however, shows how it is still at an early stage. An example is a recent attempt which, after reviewing a number of definitions of urban design, concludes that finding 'a short, clear definition . . . simply is not possible' (Rowley, 1994, 195). Instead, it was suggested we should focus on the substance, motives, methods and roles of urban design.

Do we need a short, clear definition for urban design? There are many ambiguities about some disciplines and professions as they inevitably overlap with each other. Controversy and never-ending discussions about what constitutes architecture, as distinct from buildings, can be taken as one example. It might be said that ambiguity offers a wider scope for innovation and development; once we have clearly defined

a subject we have denied it some flexibility. But how can we claim to be seriously engaged in urban design if we are not even able to define it? What we need is to remember to separate complexity from ambiguity. In our search for the meaning of urban design, we should be able to address complexity, but we should also do our best to clarify ambiguities.

We can see these ambiguities in a number of previous attempts to find a definition for urban design. For example, we can examine the list of definitions collected by the late Francis Tibbalds, a past president of the Royal Town Planning Institute and a passionate supporter of urban design (Tibbalds, 1988). These show a puzzling variety of views on urban design, including 'lots of architecture'; 'spaces between buildings'; 'a thoughtful municipal policy'; 'everything that you can see out of the window'; or 'the coming together of business, government, planning, and design' (Tibbalds, 1988, 12). The more plausible definitions include 'the interface between architecture, town planning, and related professions'; 'the three dimensional design of places for people . . . and their subsequent care and management'; 'a vital bridge, giving structure and reality to two dimensional master plans and abstract planning briefs, before detailed architectural or engineering design can take place'; 'the design of the built-up area at the local scale, including the grouping of buildings for different use, the movement systems and services associated with them, and the spaces and urban landscape between them'; and 'the creative activity by which the form and character of the urban environment at the local scale may be devised' (Tibbalds, 1988, 12). Here, as in other attempts to define urban design (Shirvani, 1985), we see a variety of foci: some are dealing with the domains of urban design, especially